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Fantasy & Science Fiction

OCT/NOV

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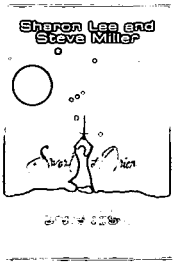

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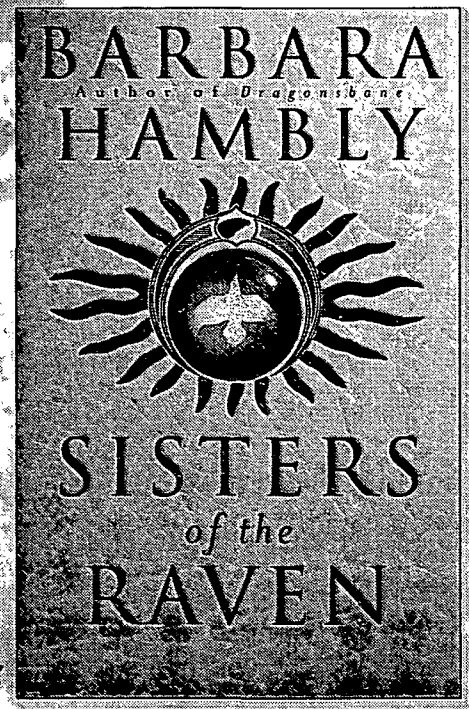

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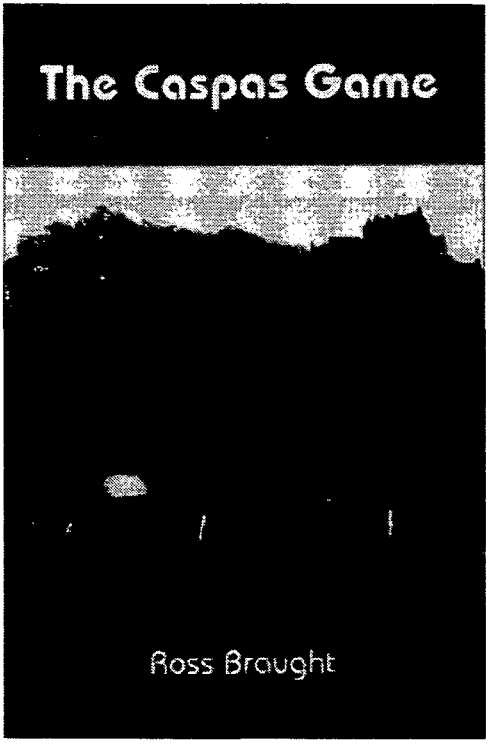

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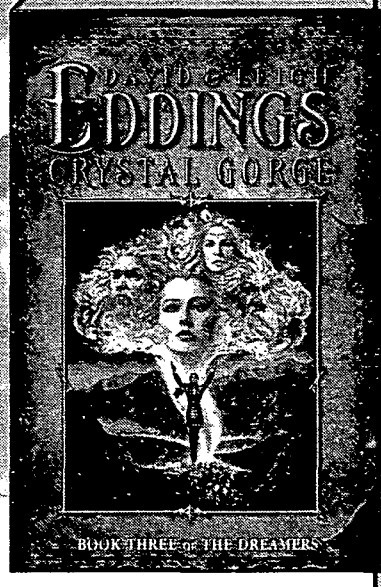

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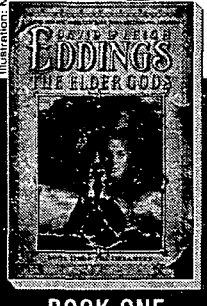

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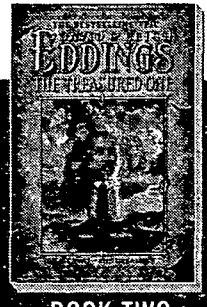

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NOVELETS

THE CALORIE MAN 8 Paolo Bacigalupi
HELP WONTED 94 Matthew Hughes
TWO HEARTS 204 Peter S. Beagle

SHORT STORIES

HELEN REMEMBERS THE STORK CLUB 59 Esther M. Friesner
FORECLOSURE 77 Joe Haldeman
SPELLS FOR HALLOWEEN: AN ACROSTIC 90 Dale Bailey
BILLY AND THE ANTS 127 Terry Bisson
THE GUNNER'S MATE 132 Gene Wolfe
FALLEN IDOLS 153 Jaye Lawrence
SILV'RY MOON 157 Steven Utley
ECHO 171 Elizabeth Hand
BOATMAN'S HOLIDAY 180 Jeffrey Ford

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POEMS

ODE TO MULTIPLE UNIVERSES 126 **Terry Pratchett**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 45 **Charles de Lint**

MUSING ON BOOKS 54 **Michelle West**

FILMS: STAR WARS, THEY'RE NOT 148 **Lucius Shepard**

SCIENCE: GLIMPSING TITAN 195 **Paul Doherty and Pat Murphy**

COMING ATTRACTIONS 240

CURIOSITIES 242 **Douglas A. Anderson**

CARTOONS: Bill Long (44), Joseph Farris (58), Arthur Masear (89, 147), Danny Shanahan(156).

COVER: BY CORY AND CATSKA ENCH FOR "TWO HEARTS"

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When Paolo Bacigalupi's first story appeared in our February 1999 issue, our esteemed film editor doubted such a polished story was a first effort and insisted on calling the author just to confirm that it wasn't a veteran writing under a pseudonym. Not one to hide behind a nom de plume, *Mr. Bacigalupi lives in Colorado with his wife and young son. He says this story was partly inspired by the sheer elegance of that muscle-powered machine known as the bicycle.*

The Calorie Man

By Paolo Bacigalupi

"NO MAMMY, NO PAPPY, poor little bastard. Money? You give money?" The urchin turned a cartwheel and then a somersault in the street, stirring yellow dust around his nakedness.

Lalji paused to stare at the dirty blond child who had come to a halt at his feet. The attention seemed to encourage the urchin; the boy did another somersault. He smiled up at Lalji from his squat, calculating and eager, rivulets of sweat and mud streaking his face. "Money? You give money?"

Around them, the town was nearly silent in the afternoon heat. A few dungareed farmers led mulies toward the fields. Buildings, pressed from WeatherAll chips, slumped against their fellows like drunkards, rain-stained and sun-cracked, but, as their trade name implied, still sturdy. At the far end of the narrow street, the lush sprawl of SoyPRO and HiGro began, a waving rustling growth that rolled into the blue-sky distance. It was much as all the villages Lalji had seen as he traveled upriver, just another farming enclave paying its intellectual property dues and shipping calories down to New Orleans.

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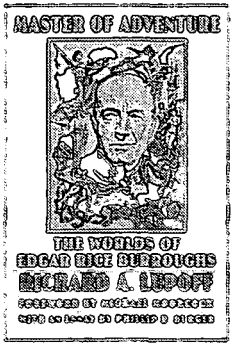

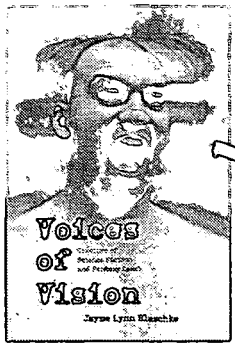

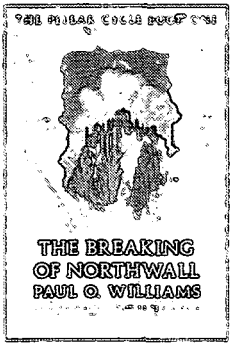

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The boy crawled closer, smiling ingratiatingly, nodding his head like a snake hoping to strike. "Money? Money?"

Lalji put his hands in his pockets in case the beggar child had friends and turned his full attention on the boy. "And why should I give money to you?"

The boy stared up at him, stalled. His mouth opened, then closed. Finally he looped back to an earlier, more familiar part of his script, "No mammy? No pappy?" but it was a query now, lacking conviction.

Lalji made a face of disgust and aimed a kick at the boy. The child scrambled aside, falling on his back in his desperation to dodge, and this pleased Lalji briefly. At least the boy was quick. He turned and started back up the street. Behind him, the urchin's wailing despair echoed. "Noooo maaaammy! Nooo paaaapy!" Lalji shook his head, irritated. The child might cry for money, but he failed to follow. No true beggar at all. An opportunist only — most likely the accidental creation of strangers who had visited the village and were open-fisted when it came to blond beggar children. AgriGen and Midwest Grower scientists and land factotums would be pleased to show ostentatious kindness to the villagers at the core of their empire.

Through a gap in the slumped hovels, Lalji caught another glimpse of the lush waves of SoyPRO and HiGro. The sheer sprawl of calories stimulated tingling fantasies of loading a barge and slipping it down through the locks to St. Louis or New Orleans and into the mouths of waiting megadonts. It was impossible, but the sight of those emerald fields was more than enough assurance that no child could beg with conviction here. Not surrounded by SoyPRO. Lalji shook his head again, disgusted, and squeezed down a footpath between two of the houses.

The acrid reek of WeatherAll's excreted oils clogged the dim alley. A pair of cheshires sheltering in the unused space scattered and molted ahead of him, disappearing into bright sunlight. Just beyond, a kinetic shop leaned against its beaten neighbors, adding the scents of dung and animal sweat to the stink of WeatherAll. Lalji leaned against the shop's plank door and shoved inside.

Shafts of sunlight pierced the sweet manure gloom with lazy gold beams. A pair of hand-painted posters scabbed to one wall, partly torn but still legible. One said: "Unstamped calories mean starving families. We

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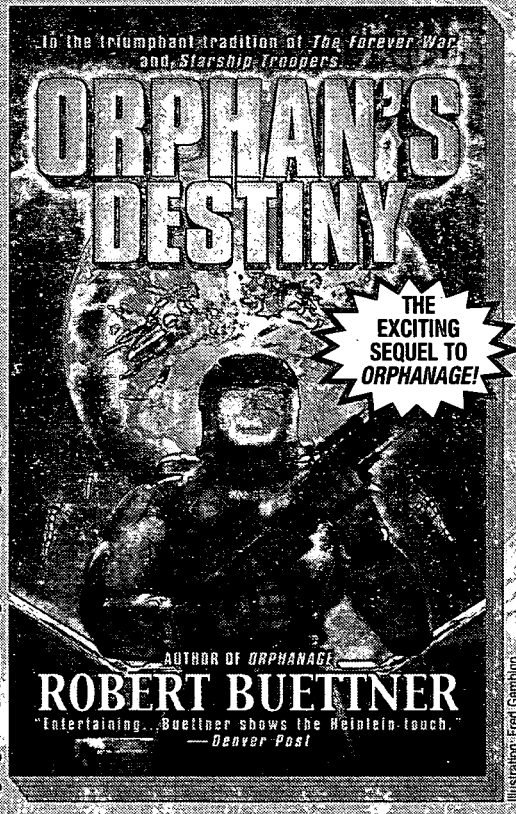
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check royalty receipts and IP stamps." A farmer and his brood stared hollow-eyed from beneath the scolding words. PurCal was the sponsor. The other poster was AgriGen's trademarked collage of kink-springs, green rows of SoyPRO under sunlight and smiling children along with the words "We Provide Energy for the World." Lalji studied the posters sourly.

"Back already?" The owner came in from the winding room, wiping his hands on his pants and kicking straw and mud off his boots. He eyed Lalji. "My springs didn't have enough stored. I had to feed the mulies extra, to make your joules."

Lalji shrugged, having expected the last-minute bargaining, so much like Shriram's that he couldn't muster the interest to look offended. "Yes? How much?"

The man squinted up at Lalji, then ducked his head, his body defensive. "F-Five hundred." His voice caught on the amount, as though gagging on the surprising greed scampering up his throat.

Lalji frowned and pulled his mustache. It was outrageous. The calories hadn't even been transported. The village was awash with energy. And despite the man's virtuous poster, it was doubtful that the calories feeding his kinetic shop were equally upstanding. Not with tempting green fields waving within meters of the shop. Shriram often said that using stamped calories was like dumping money into a methane composter.

Lalji tugged his mustache again, wondering how much to pay for the joules without calling excessive attention to himself. Rich men must have been all over the village to make the kinetic man so greedy. Calorie executives, almost certainly. It would fit. The town was close to the center. Perhaps even this village was engaged in growing the crown jewels of AgriGen's energy monopolies. Still, not everyone who passed through would be as rich as that. "Two hundred."

The kinetic man showed a relieved smile along with knotted yellow teeth, his guilt apparently assuaged by Lalji's bargaining. "Four."

"Two. I can moor on the river and let my own winders do the same work."

The man snorted. "It would take weeks."

Lalji shrugged. "I have time. Dump the joules back into your own springs. I'll do the job myself."

"I've got family to feed. Three?"

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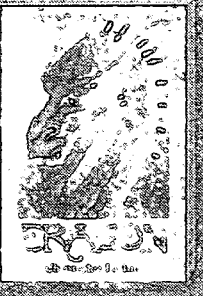

Alfred A. Knopf RANDOM HOUSE AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD.

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"You live next to more calories than some rich families in St. Louis. Two."

The man shook his head sourly but he led Lalji into the winding room. The manure haze thickened. Big kinetic storage drums, twice as tall as a man, sat in a darkened corner, mud and manure lapping around their high-capacity precision kink-springs. Sunbeams poured between open gaps in the roof where shingles had blown away. Dung motes stirred lazily.

A half-dozen hyper-developed mulies crouched on their treadmills, their rib cages billowing slowly, their flanks streaked with salt lines of sweat residue from the labor of winding Lalji's boat springs. They blew air through their nostrils, nervous at Lalji's sudden scent, and gathered their squat legs under them. Muscles like boulders rippled under their bony hides as they stood. They eyed Lalji with resentful near-intelligence. One of them showed stubborn yellow teeth that matched its owner's.

Lalji made a face of disgust. "Feed them."

"I already did."

"I can see their bones. If you want my money, feed them again."

The man scowled. "They aren't supposed to get fat, they're supposed to wind your damn springs." But he dipped double handfuls of SoyPRO into their feed canisters.

The mulies shoved their heads into the buckets, slobbering and grunting with need. In its eagerness, one of them started briefly forward on its treadmill, sending energy into the winding shop's depleted storage springs before seeming to realize that its work was not demanded and that it could eat without molestation.

"They aren't even designed to get fat," the kinetic man muttered.

Lalji smiled slightly as he counted through his wadded bluebills and handed over the money. The kinetic man unjacked Lalji's kink-springs from the winding treadmills and stacked them beside the slavering mulies. Lalji lifted a spring, grunting at its heft. Its mass was no different than when he had brought it to the winding shop, but now it fairly seemed to quiver with the mulies' stored labor.

"You want help with those?" The man didn't move. His eyes flicked toward the mulies' feed buckets, still calculating his chances of interrupting their meal.

Lalji took his time answering, watching as the mulies rooted for the

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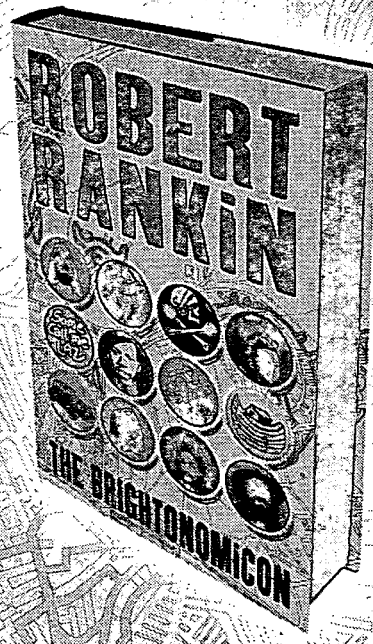

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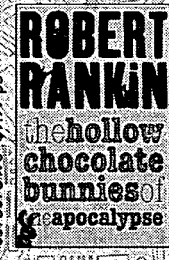

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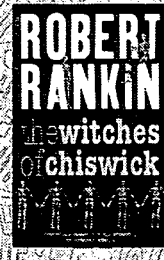

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last of their calories. "No." He hefted the spring again, getting a better grip. "My helpboy will come for the rest."

As he turned for the door, he heard the man dragging the feedbuckets away from the mulies and their grunts as they fought for their sustenance. Once again, Lalji regretted agreeing to the trip at all.

SHRIRAM HAD BEEN the one to broach the idea. They had been sitting under the awning of Lalji's porch in New Orleans, spitting betel nut juice into the alley gutters and watching the rain come down as they played chess. At the end of the alley, cycle rickshaws and bicycles slipped through the mid-morning gray, pulses of green and red and blue as they passed the alley's mouth draped under rain-glossed corn polymer ponchos.

The chess game was a tradition of many years, a ritual when Lalji was in town and Shriram had time away from his small kinetic company where he rewound people's home and boat springs. Theirs was a good friendship, and a fruitful one, when Lalji had unstamped calories that needed to disappear into the mouth of a hungry megadont.

Neither of them played chess well, and so their games often devolved into a series of trades made in dizzying succession, a cascade of destruction that left a board previously well-arrayed in a tantrum wreck, with both opponents blinking surprise, trying to calculate if the mangle had been worth the combat. It was after one of these tit-for-tat cleansings that Shriram had asked Lalji if he might go upriver. Beyond the southern states.

Lalji had shaken his head and spit bloody betel juice into the overflowing gutter. "No. Nothing is profitable so far up. Too many joules to get there. Better to let the calories float to me." He was surprised to discover that he still had his queen. He used it to take a pawn.

"And if the energy costs could be defrayed?"

Lalji laughed, waiting for Shriram to make his own move. "By who? AgriGen? The IP men? Only their boats go up and down so far." He frowned as he realized that his queen was now vulnerable to Shriram's remaining knight.

Shriram was silent. He didn't touch his pieces. Lalji looked up from the board and was surprised by Shriram's serious expression. Shriram said,

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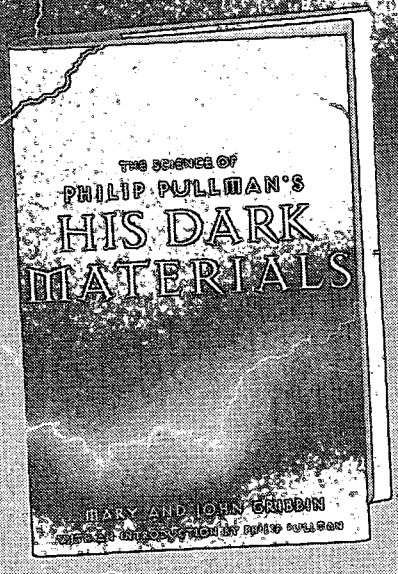
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY PHILIP PULLMAN



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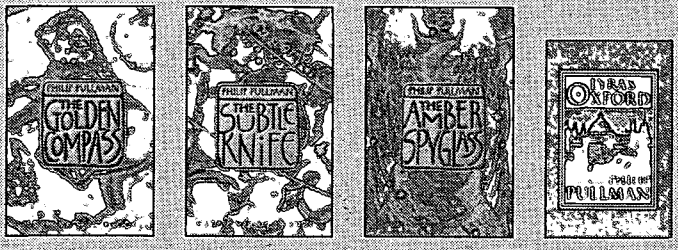

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"I would pay. Myself and others. There is a man who some of us would like to see come south. A very special man."

"Then why not bring him south on a paddle wheel? It is expensive to go up the river. How many gigajoules? I would have to change the boat's springs, and then what would the IP patrols ask? 'Where are you going, strange Indian man with your small boat and your so many springs? Going far? To what purpose?' " Lalji shook his head. "Let this man take a ferry, or ride a barge. Isn't this cheaper?" He waved at the game board. "It's your move. You should take my queen."

Shriram waggled his head thoughtfully from side to side but didn't make any move toward the chess game. "Cheaper, yes...."

"But?"

Shriram shrugged. "A swift, inconsequential boat would attract less attention."

"What sort of man is this?"

Shriram glanced around, suddenly furtive. Methane lamps burned like blue fairies behind the closed glass of the neighbors' droplet-spattered windows. Rain sheeted off their roofs, drumming wet into the empty alley. A cheshire was yowling for a mate somewhere in the wet, barely audible under the thrum of falling water.

"Is Creo inside?"

Lalji raised his eyebrows in surprise. "He has gone to his gymnasium. Why? Should it matter?"

Shriram shrugged and gave an embarrassed smile. "Some things are better kept between old friends. People with strong ties."

"Creo has been with me for years."

Shriram grunted noncommittally, glanced around again and leaned close, pitching his voice low, forcing Lalji to lean forward as well. "There is a man who the calorie companies would like very much to find." He tapped his balding head. "A very intelligent man. We want to help him."

Lalji sucked in his breath. "A generipper?"

Shriram avoided Lalji's eyes. "In a sense. A calorie man."

Lalji made a face of disgust. "Even better reason not to be involved. I don't traffic with those killers."

"No, no. Of course not. But still...you brought that huge sign down once, did you not? A few greased palms, so smooth, and you float into town

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and suddenly Lakshmi smiles on you, such a calorie bandit, and now with a name instead as a dealer of antiques. Such a wonderful misdirection."

Lalji shrugged. "I was lucky. I knew the man to help move it through the locks."

"So? Do it again."

"If the calorie companies are looking for him, it would be dangerous."

"But not impossible. The locks would be easy. Much easier than carrying unlicensed grains. Or even something as big as that sign. This would be a man. No sniffer dog would find him of interest. Place him in a barrel. It would be easy. And I would pay. All your joules, plus more."

Lalji sucked at his narcotic betel nut, spit red, spit red again, considering. "And what does a second-rate kinetic man like you think this calorie man will do? Generippers work for big fish, and you are such a small one."

Shriram grinned haplessly and gave a self-deprecating shrug. "You do not think Ganesha Kinetic could not some day be great? The next AgriGen, maybe?" and they had both laughed at the absurdity and Shriram dropped the subject.

An IP man was on duty with his dog, blocking Lalji's way as he returned to his boat lugging the kink-spring. The brute's hairs bristled as Lalji approached and it lunged against its leash, its blunt nose quivering to reach him. With effort, the IP man held the creature back. "I need to sniff you." His helmet lay on the grass, already discarded, but still he was sweating under the swaddling heat of his gray slash-resistant uniform and the heavy webbing of his spring gun and bandoliers.

Lalji held still. The dog growled, deep from its throat, and inched forward. It snuffled his clothing, bared hungry teeth, snuffled again, then its black ruff iridesced blue and it relaxed and wagged its stubby tail. It sat. A pink tongue lolled from between smiling teeth. Lalji smiled sourly back at the animal, glad that he wasn't smuggling calories and wouldn't have to go through the pantomimes of obeisance as the IP man demanded stamps and then tried to verify that the grain shipment had paid its royalties and licensing fees.

At the dog's change in color, the IP man relaxed somewhat, but still

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he studied Lalji's features carefully, hunting for recognition against memorized photographs. Lalji waited patiently, accustomed to the scrutiny. Many men tried to steal the honest profits of AgriGen and its peers, but to Lalji's knowledge, he was unknown to the protectors of intellectual property. He was an antiques dealer, handling the junk of the previous century, not a calorie bandit staring out from corporate photo books.

Finally, the IP man waved him past. Lalji nodded politely and made his way down the stairs to the river's low stage where his needleboat was moored. Out on the river, cumbrous grain barges wallowed past, riding low under their burdens.

Though there was a great deal of river traffic, it didn't compare with harvest time. Then the whole of the Mississippi would fill with calories pouring downstream, pulled from hundreds of towns like this one. Barges would clot the arterial flow of the river system from high on the Missouri, the Illinois, and the Ohio and the thousand smaller tributaries. Some of those calories would float only as far as St. Louis where they would be chewed by megadonts and churned into joules, but the rest, the vast majority, would float to New Orleans where the great calorie companies' clippers and dirigibles would be loaded with the precious grains. Then they would cross the Earth on tradewinds and sea, in time for the next season's planting, so that the world could go on eating.

Lalji watched the barges moving slowly past, wallowing and bloated with their wealth, then hefted his kink-spring and jumped aboard his needleboat.

Creo was lying on deck as Lalji had left him, his muscled body oiled and shining in the sun, a blond Arjuna waiting for glorious battle. His cornrows spread around his head in a halo, their tipped bits of bone lying like foretelling stones on the hot deck. He didn't open his eyes as Lalji jumped aboard. Lalji went and stood in Creo's sun, eclipsing his tan. Slowly, the young man opened his blue eyes.

"Get up." Lalji dropped the spring on Creo's rippled stomach.

Creo let out a whuff and wrapped his arms around the spring. He sat up easily and set it on the deck. "Rest of the springs wound?"

Lalji nodded. Creo took the spring and went down the boat's narrow stairs to the mechanical room. When he returned from fitting the spring into the gearings of the boat's power system, he said, "Your springs are

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shit, all of them. I don't know why you didn't bring bigger ones. We have to rewind, what, every twenty hours? You could have gotten all the way here on a couple of the big ones."

Lalji scowled at Creo and jerked his head toward the guard still standing at the top of the riverbank and looking down on them. He lowered his voice. "And then what would the MidWest Authority be saying as we are going upriver? All their IP men all over our boat, wondering where we are going so far? Boarding us and then wondering what we are doing with such big springs. Where have we gotten so many joules? Wondering what business we have so far upriver." He shook his head. "No, no. This is better. Small boat, small distance, who worries about Lalji and his stupid blond helpboy then? No one. No, this is better."

"You always were a cheap bastard."

Lalji glanced at Creo. "You are lucky it is not forty years ago. Then you would be paddling up this river by hand, instead of lying on your lazy back letting these fancy kink-springs do the work. Then we would be seeing you use those muscles of yours."

"If I was lucky, I would have been born during the Expansion and we'd still be using gasoline."

Lalji was about to retort but an IP boat slashed past them, ripping a deep wake. Creo lunged for their cache of spring guns. Lalji dove after him and slammed the cache shut. "They're not after us!"

Creo stared at Lalji, uncomprehending for a moment, then relaxed. He stepped away from the stored weapons. The IP boat continued upriver, half its displacement dedicated to massive precision kink-springs and the stored joules that gushed from their unlocking molecules. Its curling wake rocked the needleboat. Lalji steadied himself against the rail as the IP boat dwindled to a speck and disappeared between obstructing barge chains.

Creo scowled after the boat. "I could have taken them."

Lalji took a deep breath. "You would have gotten us killed." He glanced at the top of the riverbank to see if the IP man had noticed their panic. He wasn't even visible. Lalji silently gave thanks to Ganesha.

"I don't like all of them around," Creo complained. "They're like ants. Fourteen at the last lock. That one, up on the hill. Now these boats."

"It is the heart of calorie country. It is to be expected."

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"You making a lot of money on this trip?"

"Why should you care?"

"Because you never used to take risks like this." Creo swept his arm, indicating the village, the cultivated fields, the muddy width of river gurgling past, and the massive barges clogging it. "No one comes this far upriver."

"I'm making enough money to pay you. That's all you should concern yourself with. Now go get the rest of the springs. When you think too much, your brain makes mush."

Creo shook his head doubtfully but jumped for the dock and headed up the steps to the kinetic shop. Lalji turned to face the river. He took a deep breath.

The IP boat had been a close call. Creo was too eager to fight. It was only with luck that they hadn't ended up as shredded meat from the IP men's spring guns. He shook his head tiredly, wondering if he had ever had as much reckless confidence as Creo. He didn't think so. Not even when he was a boy. Perhaps Shriram was right. Even if Creo was trustworthy, he was still dangerous.

A barge chain, loaded with TotalNutrient Wheat, slid past. The happy sheaves of its logo smiled across the river's muddy flow, promising "A Healthful Tomorrow" along with folates, B vitamins, and pork protein. Another IP boat slashed upriver, weaving amongst the barge traffic. Its complement of IP men studied him coldly as they went by. Lalji's skin crawled. Was it worth it? If he thought too much, his businessman's instinct — bred into him through thousands of years of caste practice — told him no. But still, there was Gita. When he balanced his debts each year on Diwali, how did he account for all he owed her? How did one pay off something that weighed heavier than all his profits, in all his lifetimes?

The NutriWheat wallowed past, witlessly inviting, and without answers.

"You wanted to know if there was something that would be worth your trip upriver."

Lalji and Shriram had been standing in the winding room of Ganesha Kinetic, watching a misplaced ton of SuperFlavor burn into joules. Shriram's paired megadonts labored against the winding spindles,

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ponderous and steady as they turned just-consumed calories into kinetic energy and wound the shop's main storage springs.

Priti and Bidi. The massive creatures barely resembled the elephants that had once provided their template DNA. Generippers had honed them to a perfect balance of musculature and hunger for a single purpose: to inhale calories and do terrible labors without complaint. The smell of them was overwhelming. Their trunks dragged the ground.

The animals were getting old, Lalji thought, and on the heels of that thought came another: he, too, was getting old. Every morning he found gray in his mustache. He plucked it, of course, but more gray hairs always sprouted. And now his joints ached in the mornings as well. Shriram's own head shone like polished teak. At some point, he'd turned bald. Fat and bald. Lalji wondered when they had turned into such old men.

Shriram repeated himself, and Lalji shook away his thoughts. "No, I am not interested in anything upriver. That is the calorie companies' province. I have accepted that when you scatter my ashes it will be on the Mississippi, and not the holy Ganges, but I am not so eager to find my next life that I wish my corpse to float down from Iowa."

Shriram twisted his hands nervously and glanced around. He lowered his voice, even though the steady groan of the spindles was more than enough to drown their sounds. "Please, friend, there are people...who want...to kill this man."

"And I should care?"

Shriram made placating motions with his hands. "He knows how to make calories. AgriGen wants him, badly. PurCal as well. He has rejected them and their kind. His mind is valuable. He needs someone trustworthy to bring him downriver. No friend of the IP men."

"And just because he is an enemy of AgriGen I should help him? Some former associate of the Des Moines clique? Some ex-calorie man with blood on his hands and you think he will help you make money?"

Shriram shook his head. "You make it sound as if this man is unclean."

"We are talking of generippers, yes? How much morality can he have?"

"A geneticist. Not a generipper. Geneticists gave us megadonts." He waved at Priti and Bidi. "Me, a livelihood."

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Lalji turned on Shriram. "You take refuge in these semantics, now? You, who starved in Chennai when the Nippon genehack weevil came? When the soil turned to alcohol? Before U-Tex and HiGro and the rest all showed up so conveniently? You, who waited on the docks when the seeds came in, saw them come and then saw them sit behind their fences and guards, waiting for people with the money to buy? What traffic would I have with this sort of people? I would sooner spit on him, this calorie man. Let the PurCal devils have him, I say."

THE TOWN WAS as Shriram had described it. Cottonwoods and willows tangled the edges of the river and over them, the remains of the bridge, some of it still spanning the river in a hazy network of broken trusses and crumbling supports. Lalji and Creo stared up at the rusting construction, a web of steel and cable and concrete, slowly collapsing into the river.

"How much do you think the steel would bring?" Creo asked.

Lalji filled his cheek with a handful of PestResis sunflower seeds and started cracking them between his teeth. He spit the hulls into the river one by one. "Not much. Too much energy to tear it out, then to melt it." He shook his head and spat another hull. "A waste to make something like that with steel. Better to use Fast-Gen hardwoods, or WeatherAll."

"Not to cover that distance. It couldn't be done now. Not unless you were in Des Moines, maybe. I heard they burn coal there."

"And they have electric lights that go all night and computers as large as a house." Lalji waved his hand dismissively and turned to finish securing the needleboat. "Who needs such a bridge now? A waste. A ferry and a mulie would serve just as well." He jumped ashore and started climbing the crumbling steps that led up from the river. Creo followed.

At the top of the steep climb, a ruined suburb waited. Built to serve the cities on the far side of the river when commuting was common and petroleum cheap, it now sprawled in an advanced state of decay. A junk city built with junk materials, as transient as water, willingly abandoned when the expense of commuting grew too great.

"What the hell is this place?" Creo muttered.

Lalji smiled cynically. He jerked his head toward the green fields across the river, where SoyPRO and HiGro undulated to the horizon. "The

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very cradle of civilization, yes? AgriGen, Midwest Growers Group, PurCal, all of them have fields here."

"Yeah? That excite you?"

Lalji turned and studied a barge chain as it wallowed down the river below them, its mammoth size rendered small by the height. "If we could turn all their calories into traceless joules, we'd be wealthy men."

"Keep dreaming." Creo breathed deeply and stretched. His back cracked and he winced at the sound. "I get out of shape when I ride your boat this long. I should have stayed in New Orleans."

Lalji raised his eyebrows. "You're not happy to be making this touristic journey?" He pointed across the river. "Somewhere over there, perhaps in those very acres, AgriGen created SoyPRO. And everyone thought they were such wonderful people." He frowned. "And then the weevil came, and suddenly there was nothing else to eat."

Creo made a face. "I don't go for those conspiracy theories."

"You weren't even born when it happened." Lalj turned to lead Creo into the wrecked suburb. "But I remember. No such accident had ever happened before."

"Monocultures. They were vulnerable."

"Basmati was no monoculture!" Lalji waved his hand back toward the green fields. "SoyPRO is monoculture. PurCal is monoculture. Generippers make monoculture."

"Whatever you say, Lalji."

Lalji glanced at Creo, trying to tell if the young man was still arguing with him, but Creo was carefully studying the street wreckage and Lalji let the argument die. He began counting streets, following memorized directions.

The avenues were all ridiculously broad and identical, large enough to run a herd of megadonts. Twenty cycle-rickshaws could ride abreast easily, and yet the town had only been a support suburb. It boggled Lalji's mind to consider the scale of life before.

A gang of children watched them from the doorway of a collapsed house. Half its timbers had been removed, and the other half were splintered, rising from the foundation like carcass bones where siding flesh had been stripped away.

Creo showed the children his spring gun and they ran away. He

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scowled at their departing forms. "So what the hell are we picking up here? You got a lead on another antique?"

Lalji shrugged.

"Come on. I'm going to be hauling it in a couple minutes anyway. What's with the secrecy?"

Lalji glanced at Creo. "There's nothing for you to haul. 'It' is a man. We're looking for a man."

Creo made a sound of disbelief. Lalji didn't bother responding.

Eventually, they came to an intersection. At its center, an old signal light lay smashed. Around it, the pavement was broken through by grasses gone to seed. Dandelions stuck up their yellow heads. On the far side of the intersection, a tall brick building squatted, a ruin of a civil center, yet still standing, built with better materials than the housing it had served.

A cheshire bled across the weedy expanse. Creo tried to shoot it. Missed.

Lalji studied the brick building. "This is the place."

Creo grunted and shot at another cheshire shimmer.

Lalji went over and inspected the smashed signal light, idly curious to see if it might have value. It was rusted. He turned in a slow circle, studying the surroundings for anything at all that might be worth taking downriver. Some of the old Expansion's wreckage still had worthy artifacts. He'd found the Conoco sign in such a place, in a suburb soon to be swallowed by SoyPRO, perfectly intact, seemingly never mounted in the open air, never subjected to the angry mobs of the energy Contraction. He'd sold it to an AgriGen executive for more than an entire smuggled cargo of HiGro.

The AgriGen woman had laughed at the sign. She'd mounted it on her wall, surrounded by the lesser artifacts of the Expansion: plastic cups, computer monitors, photos of racing automobiles, brightly colored children's toys. She'd hung the sign on her wall and then stood back and murmured that at one point, it had been a powerful company...global, even.

Global.

She'd said the word with an almost sexual yearning as she stared up at the sign's ruddy polymers.

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Global.

For a moment, Lalji had been smitten by her vision: a company that pulled energy from the remotest parts of the planet and sold it far away within weeks of extraction; a company with customers and investors on every continent, with executives who crossed time zones as casually as Lalji crossed the alley to visit Shriram.

The AgriGen woman had hung the sign on her wall like the head of a trophy megadont and in that moment, next to a representative of the most powerful energy company in world, Lalji had felt a sudden sadness at how very diminished humanity had become.

Lalji shook away the memory and again turned slowly in the intersection, seeking signs of his passenger. More cheshires flitted amongst the ruins, their smoky shimmer shapes pulsing across the sunlight and passing into shadows. Creo pumped his spring gun and sprayed disks. A shimmer tumbled to stillness and became a matted pile of calico and blood.

Creo repumped his spring gun. "So where is this guy?"

"I think he will come. If not today, then tomorrow or the next." Lalji headed up the steps of the civil center and slipped between its shattered doors. Inside, it was nothing but dust and gloom and bird droppings. He found stairs and made his way upward until he found a broken window with a view. A gust of wind rattled the window pane and tugged his mustache. A pair of crows circled in the blue sky. Below, Creo pumped his spring gun and shot more cheshire shimmers. When he hit, angry yowls filtered up. Blood swatches spattered the weedy pavement as more animals fled.

In the distance, the suburb's periphery was already falling to agriculture. Its time was short. Soon the houses would be plowed under and a perfect blanket of SoyPRO would cover it. The suburb's history, as silly and transient as it had been, would be lost, churned under by the march of energy development. No loss, from the standpoint of value, but still, some part of Lalji cringed at the thought of time erased. He spent too much time trying to recall the India of his boyhood to take pleasure in the disappearance. He headed back down the dusty stairs to Creo.

"See anyone?"

Lalji shook his head. Creo grunted and shot at another cheshire,

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narrowly missing. He was good, but the nearly invisible animals were hard targets. Creo pumped his spring gun and fired again. "Can't believe how many cheshires there are."

"There is no one to exterminate them."

"I should collect the skins and take them back to New Orleans."

"Not on my boat."

Many of the shimmers were fleeing, finally understanding the quality of their enemy. Creo pumped again and aimed at a twist of light further down the street.

Lalji watched complacently. "You will never hit it."

"Watch." Creo aimed carefully.

A shadow fell across them. "Don't shoot."

Creo whipped his spring gun around.

Lalji waved a hand at Creo. "Wait! It's him!"

The new arrival was a skinny old man, bald except for a greasy fringe of gray and brown hair, his heavy jaw thick with gray stubble. Hemp sacking covered his body, dirty and torn, and his eyes had a sunken, knowing quality that unearthed in Lalji the memory of a long-ago sadhu, covered with ash and little else: the tangled hair, the disinterest in his clothing, the distance in the eyes that came from enlightenment. Lalji shook away the memory. This man was no holy man. Just a man, and a generipper, at that.

Creo resighted his spring gun on the distant cheshire. "Down south, I get a bluebill for every one I kill."

The old man said, "There are no bluebills for you to collect here."

"Yeah, but they're pests."

"It's not their fault we made them too perfectly." The man smiled hesitantly, as though testing a facial expression. "Please." He squatted down in front of Creo. "Don't shoot."

Lalji placed a hand on Creo's spring gun. "Let the cheshires be."

Creo scowled, but he let his gun's mechanism unwind with a sigh of releasing energy.

The calorie man said, "I am Charles Bowman." He looked at them expectantly, as though anticipating recognition. "I am ready. I can leave."

* * *

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Gita was dead, of that Lalji was now sure.

At times, he had pretended that it might not be so. Pretended that she might have found a life, even after he had gone.

But she was dead, and he was sure of it.

It was one of his secret shames. One of the accretions to his life that clung to him like dog shit on his shoes and reduced himself in his own eyes: as when he had thrown a rock and hit a boy's head, unprovoked, to see if it was possible; or when he had dug seeds out of the dirt and eaten them one by one, too starved to share. And then there was Gita. Always Gita. That he had left her and gone instead to live close to the calories. That she had stood on the docks and waved as he set sail, when it was she who had paid his passage price.

He remembered chasing her when he was small, following the rustle of her salwar kameez as she dashed ahead of him, her black hair and black eyes and white, white teeth. He wondered if she had been as beautiful as he recalled. If her oiled black braid had truly gleamed the way he remembered when she sat with him in the dark and told him stories of Arjuna and Krishna and Ram and Hanuman. So much was lost. He wondered sometimes if he even remembered her face correctly, or if he had replaced it with an ancient poster of a Bollywood girl, one of the old ones that Shriram kept in the safe of his winding shop and guarded jealously from the influences of light and air.

For a long time he thought he would go back and find her. That he might feed her. That he would send money and food back to his blighted land that now existed only in his mind, in his dreams, and in half-awake hallucinations of deserts, red and black saris, of women in dust, and their black hands and silver bangles, and their hunger, so many of the last memories of hunger.

He had fantasized that he would smuggle Gita back across the shining sea, and bring her close to the accountants who calculated calorie burn quotas for the world. Close to the calories, as she had said, once so long ago. Close to the men who balanced price stability against margins of error and protectively managed energy markets against a flood of food. Close to those small gods with more power than Kali to destroy the world.

But she was dead by now, whether through starvation or disease, and he was sure of it.

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And wasn't that why Shriram had come to him? Shriram who knew more of his history than any other. Shriram who had found him after he arrived in New Orleans, and known him for a fellow countryman: not just another Indian long settled in America, but one who still spoke the dialects of desert villages and who still remembered their country as it had existed before genehack weevil, leafcurl, and root rust. Shriram, who had shared a place on the floor while they both worked the winding sheds for calories and nothing else, and were grateful for it, as though they were nothing but genehacks themselves.

Of course Shriram had known what to say to send him upriver. Shriram had known how much he wished to balance the unbalanceable.

THEY FOLLOWED Bowman down empty streets and up remnant alleys, winding through the pathetic collapse of termite-ridden wood, crumbling concrete foundations, and rusted rebar too useless to scavenge and too stubborn to erode. Finally, the old man squeezed them between the stripped hulks of a pair of rusted automobiles. On the far side, Lalji and Creo gasped.

Sunflowers waved over their heads. A jungle of broad squash leaves hugged their knees. Dry corn stalks rattled in the wind. Bowman looked back at their surprise, and his smile, so hesitant and testing at first, broadened with unrestrained pleasure. He laughed and waved them onward, floundering through a garden of flowers and weeds and produce, catching his torn hemp cloth on the dried stems of cabbage gone to seed and the cling of cantaloupe vines. Creo and Lalji picked their way through the tangle, wending around purple lengths of eggplants, red orb tomatoes, and dangling orange ornament chiles. Bees buzzed heavily between the sunflowers, burdened with saddlebags of pollen.

Lalji paused in the overgrowth and called after Bowman. "These plants. They are not engineered?"

Bowman paused and came thrashing back, wiping sweat and vegetal debris off his face, grinning. "Well, engineered, that is a matter of definition, but no, these are not owned by calorie companies. Some of them are even heirloom." He grinned again. "Or close enough."

"How do they survive?"

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"Oh, that." He reached down and yanked up a tomato. "Nippon genehack weevils, or curl.111.b, or perhaps cibiscosis bacterium, something like that?" He bit into the tomato and let the juice run down his gray bristled chin. "There isn't another heirloom planting within hundreds of miles. This is an island in an ocean of SoyPRO and HiGro. It makes a formidable barrier." He studied the garden thoughtfully, took another bite of tomato. "Now that you have come, of course, only a few of these plants will survive." He nodded at Lalji and Creo. "You will be carrying some infection or another and many of these rarities can only survive in isolation." He plucked another tomato and handed it to Lalji. "Try it."

Lalji studied its gleaming red skin. He bit into it and tasted sweetness and acid. Grinning, he offered it to Creo, who took a bite and made a face of disgust. "I'll stick with SoyPRO." He handed it back to Lalji, who finished it greedily.

Bowman smiled at Lalji's hunger. "You're old enough to remember, I think, what food used to be. You can take as much of this as you like, before we go. It will all die anyway." He turned and thrashed again through the garden overgrowth, shoving aside dry corn stalks with crackling authoritative sweeps of his arms.

Beyond the garden a house lay collapsed, leaning as though it had been toppled by a megadont, its walls rammed and buckled. The collapsed roof had an ungainly slant, and at one end, a pool of water lay cool and deep, rippled with water skippers. Scavenged gutter had been laid to sluice rainwater from the roof into the pond.

Bowman slipped around the pool's edge and disappeared down a series of crumbled cellar steps. By the time Lalji and Creo followed him down, he had wound a handlight and its dim bulb was spattering the cellar with illumination as its spring ran its course. He cranked the light again while he searched around, then struck a match and lit a lantern. The wick burned high on vegetable oil.

Lalji studied the cellar. It was sparse and damp. A pair of pallets lay on the broken concrete floor. A computer was tucked against a corner, its mahogany case and tiny screen gleaming, its treadle worn with use. An unruly kitchen was shoved against a wall with jars of grains arrayed on pantry shelves and bags of produce hanging from the ceiling to defend against rodents.

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The man pointed to a sack on the ground. "There, my luggage."

"What about the computer?" Lalji asked.

Bowman frowned at the machine. "No. I don't need it."

"But it's valuable."

"What I need, I carry in my head. Everything in that machine came from me. My fat burned into knowledge. My calories pedaled into data analysis." He scowled. "Sometimes, I look at that computer and all I see is myself whittled away. I was a fat man once." He shook his head emphatically. "I won't miss it."

Lalji began to protest but Creo startled and whipped out his spring gun. "Someone else is here."

Lalji saw her even as Creo spoke: a girl squatting in the corner, hidden by shadow, a skinny, staring, freckled creature with stringy brown hair. Creo lowered his spring gun with a sigh.

Bowman beckoned. "Come out, Tazi. These are the men I told you about."

Lalji wondered how long she had been sitting in the cellar darkness, waiting. She had the look of a creature who had almost molded with the basement: her hair lank, her dark eyes nearly swallowed by their pupils. He turned on Bowman. "I thought there was only you."

Bowman's pleased smile faded. "Will you go back because of it?"

Lalji eyed the girl. Was she a lover? His child? A feral adoptee? He couldn't guess. The girl slipped her hand into the old man's. Bowman patted it reassuringly. Lalji shook his head. "She is too many. You, I have agreed to take. I prepared a way to carry you, to hide you from boarders and inspections. Her," he waved at the girl, "I did not agree to. It is risky to take someone like yourself, and now you wish to compound the danger with this girl? No." He shook his head emphatically. "It cannot be done."

"What difference does it make?" Bowman asked. "It costs you nothing. The current will carry us all. I have food enough for both of us." He went over to the pantry and started to pull down glass jars of beans, lentils, corn, and rice. "Look, here."

Lalji said, "We have more than enough food."

Bowman made a face. "SoyPRO, I suppose?"

"Nothing wrong with SoyPRO," Creo said.

The old man grinned and held up a jar of green beans floating in brine.

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"No. Of course not. But a man likes variety." He began filling his bag with more jars, letting them clink carefully. He caught Creo's snort of disgust and smiled, ingratiating suddenly. "For lean times, if nothing else." He dumped more jars of grains into the sack.

Lalji chopped the air with his hand. "Your food is not the issue. Your girl is the issue, and she is a risk!"

Bowman shook his head. "No risk. No one is looking for her. She can travel in the open, even."

"No. You must leave her. I will not take her."

The old man looked down at the girl, uncertain. She gazed back, extricated her hand from his. "I'm not afraid. I can live here still. Like before."

Bowman frowned, thinking. Finally, he shook his head. "No." He faced Lalji. "If she cannot go, then I cannot. She fed me when I worked. I deprived her of calories for my research when they should have gone to her. I owe her too much. I will not leave her to the wolves of this place." He placed his hands on her shoulders and placed her ahead of him, between himself and Lalji.

Creo made a face of disgust. "What difference does it make? Just bring her. We've got plenty of space."

Lalji shook his head. He and Bowman stared at one another across the cellar. Creo said, "What if he gives us the computer? We could call it payment."

Lalji shook his head stubbornly. "No. I do not care about the money. It is too dangerous to bring her."

Bowman laughed. "Then why come all this way if you are afraid? Half the calorie companies want to kill me and you talk about risk?"

Creo frowned. "What's he talking about?"

Bowman's eyebrows went up in surprise. "You haven't told your partner about me?"

Creo looked from Lalji to Bowman and back. "Lalji?"

Lalji took a deep breath, his eyes still locked on Bowman. "They say he can break the calorie monopolies. That he can pirate SoyPRO."

Creo boggled for a moment. "That's impossible!"

Bowman shrugged. "For you, perhaps. But for a knowledgeable man? Willing to dedicate his life to DNA helixes? More than possible. If one is

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willing to burn the calories for such a project, to waste energy on statistics and genome analysis, to pedal a computer through millions upon millions of cycles. More than possible." He wrapped his arms around his skinny girl and held her to him. He smiled at Lalji. "So. Do we have any agreement?"

Creo shook his head, puzzling. "I thought you had a money plan, Lalji, but this...." He shook his head again. "I don't get it. How the hell do we make money off this?"

Lalji gave Creo a dirty look. Bowman smiled, patiently waiting. Lalji stifled an urge to seize the lantern and throw it in his face, such a confident man, so sure of himself, so loyal....

He turned abruptly and headed for the stairs. "Bring the computer, Creo. If his girl makes any trouble, we dump them both in the river, and still keep his knowledge."

Lalji remembered his father pushing back his thali, pretending he was full when dal had barely stained the steel plate. He remembered his mother pressing an extra bite onto his own. He remembered Gita, watching, silent, and then all of them unfolding their legs and climbing off the family bed, bustling around the hovel, ostentatiously ignoring him as he consumed the extra portion. He remembered roti in his mouth, dry like ashes, and forcing himself to swallow anyway.

He remembered planting. Squatting with his father in desert heat, yellow dust all around them, burying seeds they had stored away, saved when they might have been eaten, kept when they might have made Gita fat and marriageable, his father smiling, saying, "These seeds will make hundreds of new seeds and then we will all eat well."

"How many seeds will they make?" Lalji had asked.

And his father had laughed and spread his arms fully wide, and seemed so large and great with his big white teeth and red and gold earrings and crinkling eyes as he cried, "Hundreds! Thousands if you pray!" And Lalji *had* prayed, to Ganesha and Lakshmi and Krishna and Rani Sati and Ram and Vishnu, to every god he could think of, joining the many villagers who did the same as he poured water from the well over tiny seeds and sat guard in the darkness against the possibility that the precious grains might be uprooted in the night and transported to some other farmer's field.

He sat every night while cold stars turned overhead, watching the

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seed rows, waiting, watering, praying, waiting through the days until his father finally shook his head and said it was no use. And yet still he had hoped, until at last he went out into the field and dug up the seeds one by one, and found them already decomposed, tiny corpses in his hand, rotted. As dead in his palm as the day he and his father had planted them.

He had crouched in the darkness and eaten the cold dead seeds, knowing he should share, and yet unable to master his hunger and carry them home. He wolfed them down alone, half-decayed and caked with dirt: his first true taste of PurCal.

In the light of early morning, Lalji bathed in the most sacred river of his adopted land. He immersed himself in the Mississippi's silty flow, cleansing the weight of sleep, making himself clean before his gods. He pulled himself back aboard, slick with water, his underwear dripping off his sagging bottom, his brown skin glistening, and toweled himself dry on the deck as he looked across the water to where the rising sun cast gold flecks on the river's rippled surface.

He finished drying himself and dressed in new clean clothes before going to his shrine. He lit incense in front of the gods, placed U-Tex and SoyPRO before the tiny carved idols of Krishna and his lute, benevolent Lakshmi, and elephant-headed Ganesha. He knelt in front of the idols, prostrated himself, and prayed.

They had floated south on the river's current, winding easily through bright fall days and watching as leaves changed and cool weather came on. Tranquil skies had arched overhead and mirrored on the river, turning the mud of the Mississippi's flow into shining blue, and they had followed that blue road south, riding the great arterial flow of the river as creeks and tributaries and the linked chains of barges all crowded in with them and gravity did the work of carrying them south.

He was grateful for their smooth movement downriver. The first of the locks were behind them, and having watched the sniffer dogs ignore Bowman's hiding place under the decking, Lalji was beginning to hope that the trip would be as easy as Shriram had claimed. Nonetheless, he prayed longer and harder each day as IP patrols shot past in their fast boats, and he placed extra SoyPRO before Ganesha's idol, desperately hoping that the Remover of Obstacles would continue to do so.

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By the time he finished his morning devotions, the rest of the boat was stirring. Creo came below and wandered into the cramped galley. Bowman followed, complaining of SoyPRO, offering heirloom ingredients that Creo shook off with suspicion. On deck, Tazi sat at the edge of the boat with a fishing line tossed into the water, hoping to snare one of the massive lethargic LiveSalmon that occasionally bumped against the boat's keel in the warm murk of the river.

Lalji unmoored and took his place at the tiller. He unlocked the kink-springs and the boat whirred into the deeper current, stored joules dripping from its precision springs in a steady flow as molecules unlocked, one after another, reliable from the first kink to the last. He positioned the needleboat amongst the wallowing grain barges and locked the springs again, allowing the boat to drift.

Bowman and Creo came back up on deck as Creo was asking, "...you know how to grow SoyPRO?"

Bowman laughed and sat down beside Tazi. "What good would that do? The IP men would find the fields, ask for the licenses, and if none were provided, the fields would burn and burn and burn."

"So what good are you?"

Bowman smiled and posed a question instead. "SoyPRO — what is its most precious quality?"

"It's high calorie."

Bowman's braying laughter carried across the water. He tousled Tazi's hair and the pair of them exchanged amused glances. "You've seen too many billboards from AgriGen. 'Energy for the world' indeed, indeed. Oh, AgriGen and their ilk must love you very much. So malleable, so...tractable." He laughed again and shook his head. "No. Anyone can make high calorie plants. What else?"

Nettled, Creo said, "It resists the weevil."

Bowman's expression became sly. "Closer, yes. Difficult to make a plant that fights off the weevil, the leafcurl rust, the soil bacterium which chew through their roots... so many blights plague us now, so many beasts assail our plantings, but come now, what, best of all, do we like about SoyPRO? We of AgriGen who 'provide energy to the world'?" He waved at a chain of grain barges slathered with logos for SuperFlavor. "What makes SuperFlavor so perfect from a CEO's perspective?" He turned

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toward Lalji. "You know, Indian, don't you? Isn't it why you've come all this distance?"

Lalji stared back at him. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse. "It's sterile."

Bowman's eyes held Lalji's for a moment. His smile slipped. He ducked his head. "Yes. Indeed, indeed. A genetic dead-end. A one-way street. We now pay for a privilege that nature once provided willingly, for just a little labor." He looked up at Lalji. "I'm sorry. I should have thought. You would have felt our accountants' optimum demand estimates more than most."

Lalji shook his head. "You cannot apologize." He nodded at Creo. "Tell him the rest. Tell him what you can do. What I was told you can do."

"Some things are perhaps better left unsaid."

Lalji was undaunted. "Tell him. Tell me. Again."

Bowman shrugged. "If you trust him, then I must trust him as well, yes?" He turned to Creo. "Do you know cheshires?"

Creo made a noise of disgust. "They're pests."

"Ah, yes. A bluebill for every dead one. I forgot. But what makes our cheshires such pests?"

"They molt. They kill birds."

"And?" Bowman prodded.

Creo shrugged.

Bowman shook his head. "And to think it was for people like you that I wasted my life on research and my calories on computer cycles.

"You call cheshires a plague, and truly, they are. A few wealthy patrons, obsessed with Lewis Carroll, and suddenly they are everywhere, breeding with heirloom cats, killing birds, wailing in the night, but most importantly, their offspring, an astonishing ninety-two percent of the time, are cheshires themselves, pure, absolute. We create a new species in a heartbeat of evolutionary time, and our songbird populations disappear almost as quickly. A more perfect predator, but most importantly, one that spreads.

"With SoyPRO, or U-Tex, the calorie companies may patent the plants and use intellectual property police and sensitized dogs to sniff out their property, but even IP men can only inspect so many acres. Most importantly, the seeds are sterile, a locked box. Some may steal a little

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here and there, as you and Lalji do, but in the end, you are nothing but a small expense on a balance sheet fat with profit because no one except the calorie companies can grow the plants.

"But what would happen if we passed SoyPRO a different trait, stealthily, like a man climbing atop his best friend's wife?" He waved his arm to indicate the green fields that lapped at the edges of the river. "What if someone were to drop bastardizing pollens amongst these crown jewels that surround us? Before the calorie companies harvested and shipped the resulting seeds across the world in their mighty clipper fleets, before the licensed dealers delivered the patented crop seed to their customers. What sorts of seeds might they be delivering then?"

Bowman began ticking traits off with his fingers. "Resistant to weevil and leafcurl, yes. High calorie, yes, of course. Genetically distinct and therefore unpatentable?" He smiled briefly. "Perhaps. But best of all, fecund. Unbelievably fecund. Ripe, fat with breeding potential." He leaned forward. "Imagine it. Seeds distributed across the world by the very cuckolds who have always clutched them so tight, all of those seeds lusting to breed, lusting to produce their own fine offspring full of the same pollens that polluted the crown jewels in the first place." He clapped his hands. "Oh, what an infection that would be! And how it would spread!"

Creo stared, his expression contorting between horror and fascination. "You can do this?"

Bowman laughed and clapped his hands again. "I'm going to be the next Johnny Appleseed."

LALJI WOKE suddenly. Around him, the darkness of the river was nearly complete. A few windup LED beacons glowed on grain barges, powered by the flow of the current's drag against their ungainly bodies. Water lapped against the sides of the needleboat and the bank where they had tied up. Beside him on the deck the others lay bundled in blankets.

Why had he wakened? In the distance, a pair of village roosters were challenging one another across the darkness. A dog was barking, incensed by whatever hidden smells or sounds caused dogs to startle and defend their territory. Lalji closed his eyes and listened to the gentle undulation

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of the river, the sounds of the distant village. If he pressed his imagination, he could almost be lying in the early dawn of another village, far away, long ago dissolved.

Why was he awake? He opened his eyes again and sat up. He strained his eyes against the darkness. A shadow appeared on the river blackness, a subtle blot of movement.

Lalji shook Bowman awake, his hand over Bowman's mouth. "Hide!" he whispered.

Lights swept over them. Bowman's eyes widened. He fought off his blankets and scrambled for the hold. Lalji gathered Bowman's blankets with his own, trying to obscure the number of sleepers as more lights flashed brightly, sliding across the deck, pasting them like insects on a collection board.

Abandoning its pretense of stealth, the IP boat opened its springs and rushed in. It slammed against the needleboat, pinning it to the shoreline as men swarmed aboard. Three of them, and two dogs.

"Everyone stay calm! Keep your hands in sight!"

Handlight beams swept across the deck, dazzlingly bright. Creo and Tazi clawed out of their blankets and stood, surprised. The sniffer dogs growled and lunged against their leashes. Creo backed away from them, his hands held before him, defensive.

One of the IP men swept his handlight across them. "Who owns this boat?"

Lalji took a breath. "It's mine. This is my boat." The beam swung back and speared his eyes. He squinted into the light. "Have we done something wrong?"

The leader didn't answer. The other IP men fanned out, swinging their lights across the boat, marking the people on deck. Lalji realized that except for the leader, they were just boys, barely old enough to have mustaches and beards at all. Just peachfuzzed boys carrying spring guns and covered in armor that helped them swagger.

Two of them headed for the stairs with the dogs as a fourth jumped aboard from the secured IP boat. Handlight beams disappeared into the bowels of the needleboat, casting looming shadows from inside the stairway. Creo had somehow managed to end up backed against the needleboat's cache of spring guns. His hand rested casually beside the

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catches. Lalji stepped toward the captain, hoping to head off Creo's impulsiveness.

The captain swung his light on him. "What are you doing here?"

Lalji stopped and spread his hands helplessly. "Nothing."

"No?"

Lalji wondered if Bowman had managed to secure himself. "What I mean is that we only moored here to sleep."

"Why didn't you tie up at Willow Bend?"

"I'm not familiar with this part of the river. It was getting dark. I didn't want to be crushed by the barges." He wrung his hands. "I deal with antiques. We were looking in the old suburbs to the north. It's not illeg — " A shout from below interrupted him. Lalji closed his eyes regretfully. The Mississippi would be his burial river. He would never find his way to the Ganges.

The IP men came up dragging Bowman. "Look what we found! Trying to hide under the decking!"

Bowman tried to shake them off. "I don't know what you're talking about — "

"Shut up!" One of the boys shoved a club into Bowman's stomach. The old man doubled over. Tazi lunged toward them, but the captain corralled her and held her tightly as he flashed his light over Bowman's features. He gasped.

"Cuff him. We want him. Cover them!" Spring guns came up all around. The captain scowled at Lalji. "An antiques dealer. I almost believed you." To his men he said, "He's a generipper. From a long time ago. See if there's anything else on board. Any disks, any computers, any papers."

One of them said, "There's a treadle computer below."

"Get it."

In moments the computer was on deck. The captain surveyed his captives. "Cuff them all." One of the IP boys made Lalji kneel and started patting him down while a sniffer dog growled over them.

Bowman was saying, "I'm really very sorry. Perhaps you've made a mistake. Perhaps...."

Suddenly the captain shouted. The IP men's handlights swung toward the sound. Tazi was latched onto the captain's hand, biting him.

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He was shaking at her as though she were a dog, struggling with his other hand to get his spring gun free. For a brief moment everyone watched the scuffle between the girl and the much larger man. Someone — Lalji thought it was an IP man — laughed. Then Tazi was flung free and the captain had his gun out and there was a sharp hiss of disks. Handlights thudded on the deck and rolled, casting dizzy beams of light.

More disks hissed through the darkness. A rolling light beam showed the captain falling, crashing against Bowman's computer, silver disks embedded in his armor. He and the computer slid backwards. Darkness again. A splash. The dogs howled, either released and attacking or else wounded. Lalji dove and lay prone on the decking as metal whirred past his head.

"Lalji!" It was Creo's voice. A gun skittered across the planking. Lalji scrambled toward the sound.

One of the handlight beams had stabilized. The captain was sitting up, black blood lines trailing from his jaw as he leveled his pistol at Tazi. Bowman lunged into the light, shielding the girl with his body. He curled as disks hit him.

Lalji's fingers bumped the spring gun. He clutched after it blindly. His hand closed on it. He jacked the pump, aimed toward bootfalls, and let the spring gun whir. The shadow of one of the IP men, the boys, was above him, falling, bleeding, already dead as he hit the decking.

Everything went silent.

Lalji waited. Nothing moved. He waited still, forcing himself to breathe quietly, straining his eyes against the shadows where the handlights didn't illuminate. Was he the only one alive?

One by one, the three remaining handlights ran out of juice. Darkness closed in. The IP boat bumped gently against the needleboat. A breeze rustled the willow banks, carrying the muddy reek of fish and grasses. Crickets chirped.

Lalji stood. Nothing. No movement. Slowly he limped across the deck. He'd twisted his leg somehow. He felt for one of the handlights, found it by its faint metallic gleam, and wound it. He played its flickering beam across the deck.

Creo. The big blond boy was dead, a disk caught in his throat. Blood pooled from where it had hit his artery. Not far away, Bowman was

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ribboned with disks. His blood ran everywhere. The computer was missing. Gone overboard. Lalji squatted beside the bodies, sighing. He pulled Creo's bloodied braids off his face. He had been fast. As fast as he had believed he was. Three armored IP men and the dogs as well. He sighed again.

Something whimpered. Lalji flicked his light toward the source, afraid of what he would find, but it was only the girl, seemingly unhurt, crawling to Bowman's body. She looked up into the glare of Lalji's light, then ignored him and crouched over Bowman. She sobbed, then stifled herself. Lalji locked the handlight's spring and let darkness fall over them.

He listened to the night sounds again, praying to Ganesha that there were no others out on the river. His eyes adjusted. The shadow of the grieving girl kneeling amongst lumped bodies resolved from the blackness. He shook his head. So many dead for such an idea. That such a man as Bowman might be of use. And now such a waste. He listened for signs others had been alerted but heard nothing. A single patrol, it seemed, uncoordinated with any others. Bad luck. That was all. One piece of bad luck breaking a string of good. Gods were fickle.

He limped to the needleboat's moorings and began untying. Unbidden, Tazi joined him, her small hands fumbling with the knots. He went to the tiller and unlocked the kink-springs. The boat jerked as the screws bit and they swept into the river darkness. He let the springs fly for an hour, wasting joules but anxious to make distance from the killing place, then searched the banks for an inlet and anchored. The darkness was nearly total.

After securing the boat, he searched for weights and tied them around the ankles of the IP men. He did the same with the dogs, then began shoving the bodies off the deck. The water swallowed them easily. It felt unclean to dump them so unceremoniously, but he had no intention of taking time to bury them. With luck, the men would bump along under water, picked at by fish until they disintegrated.

When the IP men were gone, he paused over Creo. So wonderfully quick. He pushed Creo overboard, wishing he could build a pyre for him.

Lalji began mopping the decks, sluicing away the remaining blood. The moon rose, bathing them in pale light. The girl sat beside the body of

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her chaperone. Eventually, Lalji could avoid her with his mopping no more. He knelt beside her. "You understand he must go into the river?"

The girl didn't respond. Lalji took it as assent. "If there is anything you wish to have of his, you should take it now." The girl shook her head. Lalji hesitantly let his hand rest on her shoulder. "It is no shame to be given to a river. An honor, even, to go to a river such as this."

He waited. Finally, she nodded. He stood and dragged the body to the edge of the boat. He tied it with weights and levered the legs over the lip. The old man slid out of his hands. The girl was silent, staring at where Bowman had disappeared into the water.

Lalji finished his mopping. In the morning he would have to mop again, and sand the stains, but for the time it would do. He began pulling in the anchors. A moment later, the girl was with him again, helping. Lalji settled himself at the tiller. Such a waste, he thought. Such a great waste.

Slowly, the current drew their needleboat into the deeper flows of the river. The girl came and knelt beside him. "Will they chase us?"

Lalji shrugged. "With luck? No. They will look for something larger than us to make so many of their men disappear. With just the two of us now, we will look like very small inconsequential fish to them. With luck."

She nodded, seeming to digest this information. "He saved me, you know. I should be dead now."

"I saw."

"Will you plant his seeds?"

"Without him to make them, there will be no one to plant them."

Tazi frowned. "But we've got so many." She stood and slipped down into the hold. When she returned, she lugged the sack of Bowman's food stores. She began pulling jars from the sack: rice and corn, soybeans and kernels of wheat.

"That's just food," Lalji protested.

Tazi shook her head stubbornly. "They're his Johnny Appleseeds. I wasn't supposed to tell you. He didn't trust you to take us all the way. To take me. But you could plant them, too, right?"

Lalji frowned and picked up a jar of corn. The kernels nestled tightly together, hundreds of them, each one unpatented, each one a genetic infection. He closed his eyes and in his mind he saw a field: row upon row

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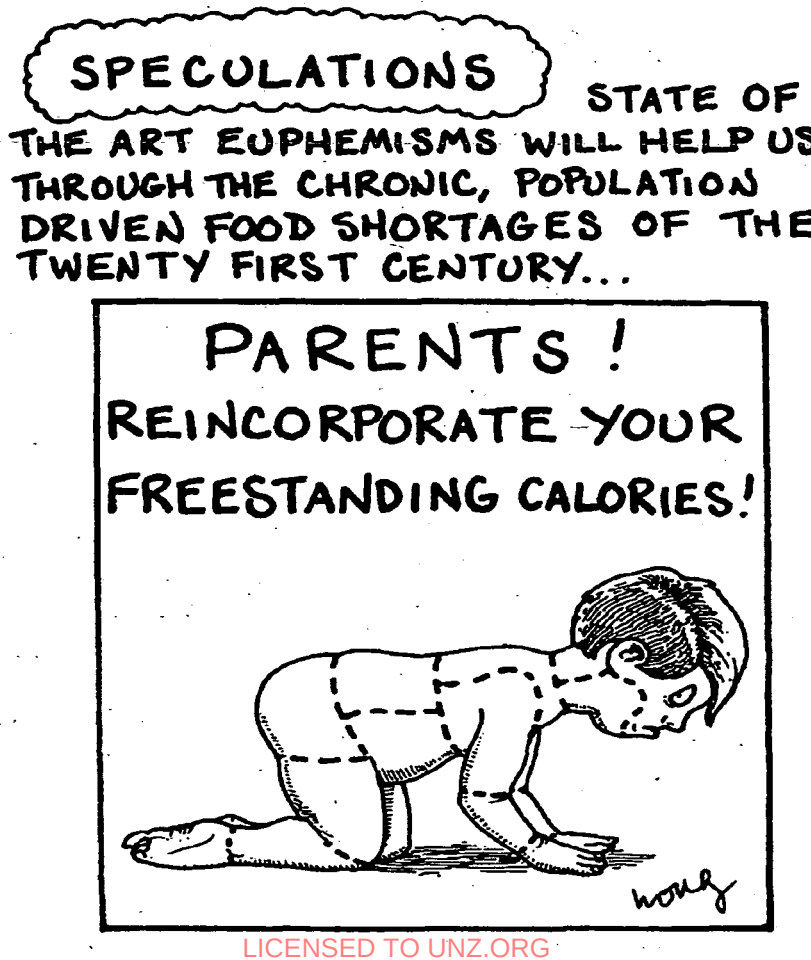
of green rustling plants, and his father, laughing, with his arms spread wide as he shouted, "Hundreds! Thousands if you pray!".

Lalji hugged the jar to his chest, and slowly, he began to smile.

The needleboat continued downstream, a bit of flotsam in the Mississippi's current. Around it, the crowding shadow hulks of the grain barges loomed, all of them flowing south through the fertile heartland toward the gateway of New Orleans; all of them flowing steadily toward the vast wide world. ☙


SPECULATIONS
STATE OF THE ART EUPHEMISMS WILL HELP US THROUGH THE CHRONIC, POPULATION DRIVEN FOOD SHORTAGES OF THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY...
PARENTS!
REINCORPORATE YOUR FREESTANDING CALORIES!
WOLF

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Mysteries, by Lisa Tuttle, Bantam, 2005, $21.

LISA TUTTLE doesn't have a large body of work under her by-line, but it's still been too long since I sat down and read one of her novels — especially considering how much I enjoyed this one.

It has a great opening, with the protagonist (one Ian Kennedy, an expatriate American living in the UK who specializes in finding missing people) relating the mysterious disappearance of his father when he was a little boy. One moment the father is standing in a farmer's field with the young Kennedy, the next he literally vanishes.

Then he tells us how it's not a true memory, but one he appropriated from a book of mysterious disappearances, although it wasn't until a few years after the alleged incident took place that he realized what he'd done.

That sets the tone of the book as it plays with what we know of the world and the much larger part of it — the *mysteries* of it — that we don't.

Kennedy is hired by a woman to find her daughter who disappeared in Scotland after an archaeological dig. Common sense says she met up with a man and simply took off with him. But the mother says she wasn't like that, and adding to the riddle is the fact that she left behind all her personal belongings in the B&B where she was staying.

As Kennedy investigates, he soon finds connections to an old case of his — his first case, in fact. Through backstory segments that are intermingled with the main storyline we learn that the girl in this first case was abducted by the fairies. Or at least that's what Kennedy believes. Most of the time. And if he's going to get this new girl back, he has to convince her mother and the girl's boyfriend that this is the case once again.

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The prose in the book is wonderful, the characters interesting, and I especially like the way that Tuttle plays with time, doling out what we need to know in both stories only as we need to know it. I also like the fact that there could be mundane reasons for pretty much everything that's going on. That she does such a great job of evoking the Scottish countryside and the city of London is a bonus.

How it all works out, you'll have to discover for yourself. But what I do know is that you'll thoroughly enjoy the company of her characters as you follow their often frustrating, but always interesting, attempts to get something concrete and understandable out of the disappearances of these young women.

Day of the Dead, by J. A. Jance, William Morrow, 2004, $23.95.

Kiss of the Bees, by J. A. Jance, Avon, 2001, $7.50.

These are the second and third books in an ongoing series that Tucson, Arizona, writer J. A. Jance has been writing, set in her hometown and centering around the Ladd and Walker families. The first book is *Hour of the Hunter* (Avon, 1991), which I haven't read — mostly because I came to the series with *Kiss of the Bees,* and the backstory is filled in so well, I didn't feel an inclination to read it. But more on that later.

First I should explain why I'm discussing a pair of what are ostensibly mystery/thriller novels in this column.

I always find it fascinating to see what writers outside of our genre do with folk tales and myth. They often approach it with a much fresher take than genre writers do, simply because...well, they think differently.

I don't necessarily mean in how they construct their plots and characters, because every good writer has an individual approach to the basics of storytelling. It's more that they (or their characters) don't accept the supernatural as a given, so the whole idea of myth impinging upon the "real world" is dealt with in a manner that can be pleasantly foreign to the jaded genre reader.

Sometimes, the supernatural element doesn't even take the stage. It simply exists in tandem, adding resonance to the non-supernatural storyline (Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams* is a good example).

In Jance's case, at least with these books, she has taken the mythology of the Tohono O'otham (a

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Native tribe indigenous to the Tucson area) and woven it into the fabric of this series of contemporary mystery/thrillers. There are echoes of Tony Hillerman, to be sure (the mix of a Southwestern Indian culture with a mystery; policemen as characters), but in her novels, the supernatural actually takes the stage — or at least it does so in the minds of her characters.

Because the thing is, for many people, the supernatural is a natural part of their life, something they accept without questioning. There's no point in anyone from outside their culture explaining how it's impossible — any more than a non-Christian can, or even should, tell a true believer that faith doesn't explain God.

Jance also uses snippets of Tohono O'otham creation myths and learning stories to open chapters, which lends a sense of the otherworld to sections where there would otherwise be no hint of the supernatural.

So there's lots of good stuff going on in these books. And Jance is quite the writer. The prose is matter-of-fact, but it can also sing when appropriate. The characters run the full gamut: some honest and likable, some despicable, some prone to heroics, others to weakness. There's a good background knowledge in law enforcement, Native culture, and the setting of Tucson and the surrounding desert.

But....

Could you see that "but" coming?

These are murder mysteries, so you know there are deaths. And they're thrillers, so you know that likable characters will be imperiled and the clock will be ticking against their survival. Those are both given.

Unfortunately, Jance also has a tendency to overstate her descriptions/plotting when it comes to the peril involving certain characters.

Now it's not that I'm a particularly innocent reader. I read all the early Clive Barker collections when they came out, as well as much of that wave of "splatterpunk" books that appeared in the late '80s/early '90s (though, to be honest, having read them once, I have no interest in revisiting any of that material).

But there's something very disturbing about the unrelenting violence in certain scenes in these two books by Jance.

One can argue that the violence is supposed to be disturbing, and I certainly don't want to tell an author how to write her book, but in this case I believe she would have an even larger audience for her

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work if she toned down the graphic scenes of young girls being tortured. If she let us know what was going on in less graphic terms...well, we readers have imaginations, and we can fill in the details as needed — or skim over them if it's too much for us. But Jance, like the push-it-to-the-edge horror writers of a couple of decades ago, puts long, truly unpleasant scenes in front of us and there's no escaping them, skim though you might.

As I said above, I'm not going to tell a writer how to write her book. I'm sure those scenes are present for us to see just how despicable her antagonists are. But while I know many people I'd like to recommend this series to, I won't do so because I know they'll truly find those sections too upsetting. And that's a shame, because there is so much spirit and heart in the rest of the material — not to mention a genuine respect for the Tohono O'otham culture, coupled with the ability to convey its mysteries and resonance in a considerate and meaningful manner.

Four and Twenty Blackbirds, by Cherie Priest, Tor Books, 2005, $13.95.

Say what we might about not judging a book by its cover, we're still attracted to certain titles by the art the publisher uses to lure us inside the books they publish. That was definitely the case for me with Priest's debut novel. How could I not be intrigued by the three empty dresses cavorting about on a lawn with a dark forest in the background and a blackbird flying overhead?

I had to know. What inhabits these dresses?

Ghosts, it turns out. And our first-person protagonist Eden Moore sees them as readily as you or I do people on the street. That only becomes problematic when the mystery behind these ghosts also hides the reason that her cousin keeps trying to kill her. Ineptly, mind you, but there are still casualties.

The deeper Moore explores her past and its connection to the ghosts, the more trouble she gets into.

This novel is a perfect example of what I'm always trying to tell new writers: *Anyplace* can be interesting, just as any kinds of characters can capture a reader's imagination. The only trick is that you have to imbue the people and setting with the same love and interest you feel for them. If you can't do that, if you don't care enough, then why would you expect your readers to?

It's also not such a bad idea to set your story in your hometown.

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Sure, it might be familiar to you, but for everybody who doesn't live there, it can be wonderfully exotic and fresh. I'd much rather read a book set in Chattanooga, Tennessee, or some such place, than yet another story in New York or Los Angeles.

Of course you also have to be a decent writer to make it work, and Priest kills as a stylist. Debut novel? You could have fooled me. *Four and Twenty Blackbirds* feels like it was written by an author with the assurance and experience of already having many books under her belt. It simply oozes a contemporary Southern Gothic charm, by which I mean that while it's definitely set in the present, its roots are firmly entangled in the past.

The narrator's voice is pitch-perfect, the cast wonderfully eccentric and realized, the plot suitably puzzling and steeped in mystery, and that setting. I could feel the humidity while I was reading the book. Hear the mosquitoes. Smell the damp forests. Share the same eerie frisson of the narrator as she explores the old abandoned sanitarium in the woods.

In other words, the book has everything going for it and you should definitely pick up a copy to see for yourself.

Urban Shaman, by C.E. Murphy, Luna, 2005, $13.95.

J.A. Jance's books, mentioned above, are cross-genre, only marketed as straight mysteries. But that doesn't have to be the case. *Urban Shaman* is a book that mixes Celtic folklore and Native shamanism with a police procedural, and yet, the publisher has no trouble marketing the book for exactly what it is. They don't have to hide it behind an inappropriate high fantasy cover, or be otherwise coy in presenting it.

And instead of being surprised at the audacity of the author, we can just get on with enjoying the story.

Joanne Walker is a mechanic for the Seattle police department. Coming back on the plane from visiting her dying mother in Ireland, she sees a woman being attacked by a man and a pack of dogs as the plane flies in low for its landing. Not knowing why she feels compelled to do so — because surely, she'd be too late to rescue the woman — she immediately gets a cab and tries to find the place she saw from the air.

The next thing you know, this half-Irish, half-Cherokee woman is involved with banshees, the Wild Hunt, and coyote tricksters, and

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everything she ever thought she knew about the world is turned upon its head.

Murphy has a likable prose style, presents us with an engaging cast of characters, and has a good sense of how to blend humor and action with a healthy dollop of mysticism and folklore. It's not a Big Think book, but its freewheeling, breezy style is the perfect way to spend a couple of hours away from mundane reality.

If you don't find this book entertaining, you're probably asleep.

The Surrogates, by Robert Venditti & Brett Weldele, Top Shelf Productions, 2005, $2.95 per issue.

It's the near future, a world where people don't interact physically with one another anymore. Instead they use "surrogates" — man-made humanoids that seem as real as a living person. The real human stays at home and experiences what the surrogate does. And of course, you can have any appearance you want: young, good-looking, male or female. So a fat construction worker's surrogate can be a beautiful young woman. In a marriage, the husband and wife might never really see each other in the flesh — only getting together through their surrogates, which never change, never age, never get sick, never die because they aren't alive in the first place.

But all of this is only background to the plot in which surrogates are being shut down — their circuits fried as though they've been hit by lightning. Our point of view into this world is one of two police detectives investigating the case. The prime suspect is an ideological throwback, a "prophet" living in a junkyard outside the city proper to whom the idea of the surrogates is an abomination.

It's all a metaphor for the way people hide behind on-line identities, I'm guessing, and by taking it to this next step on the computer-based evolutionary scale, the series raises any number of fascinating questions.

The writer is Robert Venditti, and while this is his first published work, given the quality of the plotting and dialogue, it certainly won't be his last. Artist Brett Weldele is also a relative newcomer, although he has previously done work for Image Comics and Oni Press. His approach to narrative art harkens more to the style of a Bill Sienkiewicz, loose and free in its linework, rather than the slick art favored by so many mainstream comic artists these days.

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How it will all look on the page I can't say since I've only had the chance to read the first couple of issues in PDF files. But unless they do something very wrong in the production stage, I'm sure it will be impressive. It certainly looks and reads great on a computer screen.

Issue 1 is slated for a July release, but I've no doubt they'll be collecting all five issues into a trade paperback once the whole series has seen print in regular comic book format.

Sex and the Slayer, by Lorna Jowett, Wesleyan University Press, 2005, $22.95.

Finding Serenity, edited by Jane Espenson, Benbella Books, 2005, $17.95.

So what is it with the f&sf genre that we take our films and TV shows so seriously? Is there another contemporary field that produces anything close to the number of spin-offs, anecdotal collections, and scholarly studies that we do?

I'm not going to get into an argument about how this sort of material (especially the spin-offs) supposedly dilute the genre. So far as I'm concerned, if you're getting pleasure from reading this sort of thing, then who am I (or who is anyone, for that matter) to tell you that you should be reading something else? And yes, there are people who only read media-related books, but so what? Most of us balance our time with plenty of original material, and good writing will always find a home and an audience.

All that said, sometimes I have to wonder at the sheer volume of some of this material and who's buying it.

Lorna Jowett's *Sex and the Slayer* is a good example. It's an in-depth collection of essays exploring the gender issues to be found in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The prose is strong and relatively uncluttered by pretension, the scope is exhaustive, and there's much to be learned and argued with. But are viewers of the show really drawn to these kinds of books? Or has the show simply become an excuse for scholars to showcase their own particular passions by utilizing a suddenly trendy cultural icon?

I don't mean to pick on Jowett's book specifically. I've seen any number of such books over the past few years, scrutinizing every facet of the show, and I find the ongoing popularity in this sort of essay-writing curious. That said, I have to admit I like the idea of scholars

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holing up in their studies with DVD collections of the shows, watching them to see what Jowett and the other writers are talking about, formulating their own arguments and counter-arguments, and, just maybe, enjoying the material for its own merit.

Finding Serenity, edited by Jane Espenson (one of the writers for *Firefly*, the show which is the focus of this book) takes a bit of a more populist approach, with contributions by everyone from Ginjer Buchanan and Lawrence Watt-Evans to our own Michelle Sagara West. Rather than focusing on any one particular aspect of the show, the material ranges from opinion and anecdotal to in-depth criticism, most of it very readable, and all of it of interest to regular viewers of the short-lived series. The upcoming feature film version of the show (probably out by the time you read this) will no doubt create more interest in the book.

But bottom line, these volumes will only really appeal to fans of the shows, or in the case of the Jowett book, also to students of gender studies.

The Ice Queen, by Alice Hoffman, Little, Brown, 2005, $23.95.

Regular readers of this column already know of my fondness for Hoffman's writing. Whenever I get a new book by her, everything else gets put aside and I allow myself the pleasure of being swept away for an evening, transported into the lives of her multifaceted characters through her luminous prose.

She has more than twenty books to her credit — many of them ranking among my all-time favorites — and one of the things that constantly surprises me is how she still manages to outdo herself from novel to novel. To be honest, I'm a little in awe of her talent, though happily that doesn't interfere with my enjoyment of the books.

An aspect of *The Ice Queen* approaches that age-old fairy tale question: what if you get what you wish for?

As a young girl, our unnamed protagonist tells her mother, in a fit of petulant anger, "I wish you were dead." The mother is on her way out to see some friends, but she never makes it, dying in a car crash en route to the diner where she was supposed to meet up with them.

Coincidence, of course, but that little eight-year-old girl grows up being very, very careful about what she wishes for in the future. She sees herself as an ice queen, who

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can feel nothing. Who must do nothing, form no relationships, in case she repeats her terrible misuse of power with other wishes.

Fast forward from New England — where she and her brother Ned were raised by their grandmother and she became a librarian obsessed with books about death — to Florida, where her brother is now a meteorologist and she is struck by lightning. When she recovers, she suffers neurological damage and can no longer see the color red.

Her brother gets her to take part in a study group of lightning strike victims (Orlon County, where she now lives, apparently gets two-thirds of the state's lightning strikes), and that leads her to the mysterious Lazarus Jones, who was dead for forty minutes after his own lightning strike.

There's little in the way of the supernatural in this book — or at least little for which other explanations can't be found — but its atmosphere and all its underpinnings are rife with the dark blood of fairy tales, from "The Snow Queen" to "Bluebeard," with many a way stop in between. Hoffman balances the matter-of-fact first person voice and temperament of her protagonist with events and characters that become increasingly mystical and off-kilter.

The journey takes us through the dark woods that all fairy tales do while also providing us with a bounty of lore surrounding the effects of lightning. The characters interact with a crackle of electricity, and the book's payoffs are subtle and insightful, and while unexpected, not unearned.

The Ice Queen shows us an artist at the top of her game.

Did I mention that Hoffman's pretty much my favorite author writing today? Read this book and you'll see why.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Musing on Books

Michelle West

Spin, by Robert Charles Wilson, Tor, 2005, $24.95.

Cagebird, by Karin Lowachee, Warner Aspect, 2005, $6.99.

THIS column used to have a slightly different title *(Guilty Pleasures)*, because at that time in my life — with a new baby, deadlines, new house with attendant new bills — reading, the act of sitting down in a chair for my own pleasure and edification, *was*, to me, a guilty pleasure, and was usually followed by a guiltier "I should be writing, doing housework, playing with the baby." At that time, much of what I read for, and hungered for, was the comfort of reading, and even comfort reading, and if I have a broad sense of comfort, this defined the books I picked up and finished for a long time.

Things move and change with time; children get older, time comes back, life picks up the hallowed pieces and moves on. Before I had children and exited the much-loved routine of my bookstore life, I often moved into emotional dead zones. Sometimes these used to be retreats, and sometimes they were just states that existed, like a layer between my sense of the world and the world itself.

My way out of these was to read something, but in these states, I was often hypercritical; that hind brain that wanted comfort clashed with the front brain that wanted logic and rationality, that swamped the ability to suspend disbelief and go with the fairy tale. So a book at that time had to have one of two things (or preferably both) — it had to have an emotional viscerality that made it so immediate it moved beneath the skin and logic, evading all defenses, or it had to be built in an irreproachably clear and rational way.

Oh, and the language itself had to move me; the words had to have

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a cadence that was more, much more, than simple journalism.

This has been my state of mind this month; many books that would normally fulfill a need have failed to reach me in that dead zone.

Robert Charles Wilson's latest novel, *Spin*, was therefore not only a fine novel, but also a godsend. In some ways, it is his most traditional sf novel — an almost golden age what-if story, with widgets and edges and some very clear thought and extrapolation. But the golden age of sf was decades ago, and from that tradition, this novel emerges, like the full plant from seedlings.

From the viewpoint of a boy and his twin friends, whose story, interwoven between the past and the present, forms the core of the novel, we watch as one October night on the edge of a childhood that is evaporating, the stars go out. Not slowly, but all at once, like a great eclipse of everything visual.

Without stars, nautical ships in the old days would have lost all bearing, and in some ways, without stars, so does the contemporary world Wilson paints. No stars, no known spatial geography, and no answers about the phenomenon that affects the entire world have a different effect on each of the three friends who witness it, and Wilson is such a master of observation that the differences are multilayered, complex, and very real.

Tyler Dupree, the narrator, son of the housekeeper to the Lawtons, is no dummy, but he might as well be, in the presence of Diane and James Lawton, brilliant fraternal twins a year and a half older, educated at the most prestigious of institutions money could buy. James's father, E.D., is not exactly a self-made man, but he intends that his son be his worthy heir, and has defined everything about his son's life, pushing him and encouraging his curiosity, his burning desire for knowledge.

It is James whose life *becomes* the Spin, as the barrier is eventually dubbed. James, who is at the edge of all the information money and connections can buy; James, who understands that time moves at a normal pace *within* the Spin — but that normal is all relative; for every second that passes on Earth, within the Spin, years pass in the universe outside. Even Tyler can do the math: by the time he's forty, if they're lucky, the sun will be dying and the world will be a large, empty rock, stripped of atmosphere and life.

But the Spin is clearly technological. And while James races time — the world's, his own — to come

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up with a solution that will save the human race in general, if not in specific, Diane faces the end of the world in a different way, and Tyler, being Tyler, goes on with his life, accepting the generosity — the horrible, condescending generosity — of E. D. Lawton to go to medical school, to become a doctor, to act as if things will go on. But his life is entwined with the twins, with their work, with his own attachment to the past, and his hope for the future, which rests on their shoulders, their achievements and their failures.

I want to go on. I want to say something about the Mars colony, the seeding of a planet, the results within a week of Earth time, a year of Earth time, all of this brilliantly and minimally conceived by Wilson; I want to talk about the results of that experiment, the resulting very credible political struggles. I want to — as I often do — wax eloquent about his characters, his ability to create the real with grace and compassion; to hold judgment in abeyance, or to temper it with understanding.

Instead, I will say that Wilson is *always* a fabulous writer, with a gift for dialogue and an insight into how people would react in situations they would never face in real life. What he often fails to do is *end* his work, or to end it in a way that holds the strength of the rest of the book. He is one of the very, very few writers I read regardless; his writing speaks very strongly to me, and in the end, the emotional texture of the journey is worth whatever finish line he arrives at.

And so back to *Spin*. This is Wilson's finest work to date, and the caveat about endings does not in any way apply. (I'm told this book is the start of a trilogy, but if no one had told me, I would not have guessed.) His quiet, evocative language, his nod to the nuclear generation — the children who grew up knowing that there wouldn't be a world to come home to because they *knew* some madman was going to push a red button and there wasn't a damn thing they could about it — and the hard sf inventiveness that is often overlooked in his work because his work has so much else that is compelling, combine here in perfect balance.

We move from the complex and complicated what-if of a future Earth to the space opera universe that Karin Lowachee first showed us in *Warchild*.

This time, she gives us Yuri's life, alternating between his present course and the past that defined

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him. Yuri is another of Falcone's damaged protégés, another failed experiment, another life haunted by a dead man's ghost. But unlike Jos Musey from *Warchild*, who escaped Falcone as a child, Yuri stayed with him until he was in his late teens; this is as much of the pirate culture as Lowachee has yet revealed.

At the end of *Burndive*, Yuri was incarcerated, and that's where this story begins: in jail, in a holding cell, in the company of a government interrogator. Or two. The second, a diffident, attractive, friendly man, is part of the covert Black Ops, and he offers Yuri freedom — of a sort — in exchange for information.

But Yuri has made possibly his first real mistake in prison; he's attached himself to another young man, named Finch, someone he sees as weak, dependent, and *his*. Yuri is an interesting blend of the cunning and the almost naïve; all of his considerable intellect is honed and focused to a single point: surviving pirate culture, and staying on top of it.

Finch is the card played against him, and in the end, it is for Finch's safety that he barters, agreeing to a freedom that seems a lot like certain death. He wanted out. He botched that. Out is a jail cell.

He's offered the life he attempted to abandon: the pirate ship that was both his command and his prison. Maybe he can take it back, and hold it, if he can convince the other pirates that his freedom is not a ruse.

But the plan to spring him develops a snag when he insists that Finch go with him; he intends for Finch to be freed, but Ops has other ideas; they send Finch with him to a ship that's not quite home. And Finch has never been a pirate.

Yuri is a killer, but he is not a machine; Lowachee's ability to create a believable and vulnerable child killer makes the early part of this book Lowachee's darkest journey yet. Yuri's early life plagues him because he shares it in his sleep, in his walking sleep, with Finch, speaking names that mean everything and nothing to his companion: Bo-Sheng. Estienne. Falcone.

Finch asks questions. His quiet presence demands answers that Yuri is almost — but not quite — incapable of giving. He can see what he saw as a child, and evaluate it as an adult, and in the end, balancing all of the needs, the hopes, and the guilt of that early life, he must make — truly make — a choice.

One of the many things I admire about Lowachee's writing is her ability to speak in different

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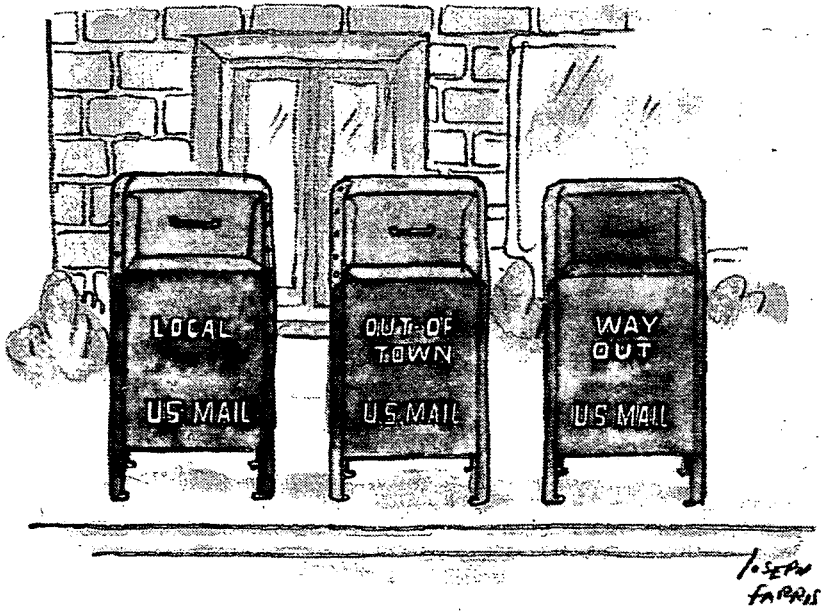
voices; to find the core of a character, to speak and think in a way that makes each character distinctly different from any other character she's created.

This novel is not about the sparkling idea, the shiny new technology; it is about, instead, simple and complex emotional motivation, human choices and weaknesses, all the consequences that are the fallout of those things. Lowachee is not merely a talent to enjoy, but one to envy.

Although Lowachee's novels in this universe, *Warchild, Burndive* and *Cagebird*, each stand alone, I think they're best read as a single piece, as an examination, among other things, of how much two men impact the lives of three children, and how that shapes the people they become. I've said this before, and I'll say it again; she reminds me very much of early C. J. Cherryh, and there's not much higher accolade.

Where Wilson is almost elegant in his compassion, Lowachee is visceral — but they both bring an understanding to their people that I find utterly convincing, and in the end, it's that conviction that captivates me. ☙



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Earlier this year, Esther Friesner took us back to ancient Sumeria with "Last Man Standing." Then she regaled us with some Victorian madness à la Cthulhu in the March issue. Now she gives us a contemporary tale, and a more sober one at that.

Julian Huxley said that we humans define ourselves by the ways in which we treat animals. Perhaps it's worth adding that we also define ourselves by the ways in which we treat our gods and heroes.

Helen Remembers the Stork Club

By Esther M. Friesner

OLD HABITS DIE HARD. EVERY morning Helen wakes up at the same god-awful hour, the same time that Aggie used to start barking for his first walk of the day. Aggie is three years dead, ashes in a pink-and-gold J. C. Penney vase on the mantelpiece, and yet she still wakes up, come rain or come shine, come hell or high water, to walk a dead dog through the city streets and to see if anything's changed.

Has it? That depends on whether she looks out of her window or into her mirror. The city's springtime still brings blossoms to the little gated communities of daffodils on Park Avenue and summer's always stinking hot, except where spills of overchilled air from storefronts turn her sweat to icy tears as she walks by. Autumn in New York is one of the few things she still doesn't find to be overrated, but winter's a bitch that could give frigidity lessons to her fourth husband's third wife.

Today it's spring, and damn well about time. Each winter here seems to last just long enough for her to start a serious flirtation with making the move to Florida at long, long last. But then what? There's not enough

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money left in any of her accounts to pay for a little Pompano Beach *pied-à-terre* and still keep up the payments on her mint cond. pre-war high ceil. 2 BR, LR w/FPL, frml DR gem. It's rent-controlled, thanks be unto her dear, departed Daddy, who taught her the value of getting in on the ground floor with real estate deals. Of course he was talking about Pompeii, but Helen knows enough to sift through all the ve-ry slow-ly ut-tered instructions men benevolently insist on handing down to her. It's pearl-diving in pig-slop, sorting the really useful information from the don't-worry-your-pretty-little-head-about-it swill.

Her apartment is worth a fortune in today's market. If she went down to Florida only to discover that fist-sized cockroaches and aggressive mildew held no allure, she'd never be able to afford another place like this one; not in Manhattan, and she'll board Charon's ferry willingly long before she'll set foot on the Brooklyn Bridge, thank you *so* very much.

So she can't move, though the landlord would be ecstatic if she did opt out of the city. Every time he sees her, he looks at her with hot, hungry eyes. She knows it's no longer her flesh he craves to possess, but her real estate. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même* damn *chose*. That's how it was with her first husband, too. Menelaus could have had his pick of plenty of other women once he discovered she'd flown the Spartan coop, but none of them would give him the political clout to continue to rule *her* kingdom. (Not that he ever told the truth of it to the Mykenaean troops massed up to take her back from Troy. It's always best to claim you're fighting a war for high principles like love and honor, especially when you're playing out the bloody Punch and Judy puppet show with other women's sons.)

Helen slips her feet into backless blue terrycloth slippers with white daisies embroidered on the toes and shuffles into the bathroom. One of the forty-watt bulbs in the two-headed flower-blossom fixture over the sink blew out last Tuesday and she still hasn't gotten around to replacing it. She rather likes the dim and creamy light — it's kind to her. The deeper wrinkles near her eyes lose some of their power to cut her to the heart. Too bad the soft rings of sagging flesh around her neck refuse to do the same. They're her own personal choke-collar, and Grampa Kronos really gets a kick out of yanking her chain.

She sighs and thinks wistfully of her bed. If she went back between the

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sheets and didn't come out until tomorrow or the next day, would anyone notice? Would anyone care? Her friends are dead, dust and ashes and little brown bits of bone. She's grown too weary to bother making new ones: They'll only die and leave her all alone again, like Aggie did. She's heartsick at the very thought of facing more funerals for those she's loved. They're gone, all gone, and she really doesn't know why she hasn't joined them.

Oh, wait, yes she does: Death is boring. Not as boring as the good old days back in Sparta when all she had to look forward to was the loom by day and Menelaus grunting over her every second or third night, but a close second.

Since death is not an option, she gets dressed and goes to Starbucks. The day passes with shopping at Bendel's and Bloomie's and Bergdorf's, a brief phone call to arrange matters for the coming evening, and tea at the Plaza Hotel. She's all by herself and looks well over thirty-five, so she's shunted aside despite her standing reservation until such time as it suits the *maître d'* to decide she's visible again. Age before beauty? This is Manhattan: Get real.

After tea there's time for one last spot of shopping — thirty-three hundred years old and she hasn't got a *thing* to wear tonight — so she strolls down Fifth Avenue to Saks. Just across the street from the great department store, St. Patrick's Cathedral catches the golden light of the declining sun, but Helen has no patience for any fading beauty but her own, especially when it comes from the enemy's camp. She glares at the towering spires and mutters dreadful imprecations against the upstart Galilean whose minions hounded Daddy to his death. Once upon a time, when Aggie was still alive, she'd stolen a handful of holy water from the font inside St. Patrick's, dribbled it into a self-sealing plastic baggie and brought it home for the dog to drink. It was a petty vengeance, one that did no good and made no difference, unless she counted Aggie's subsequent bout of tummy trouble and the cost of cleaning all her best rugs. She learned a valuable lesson from that: Misplaced faith can give you the runs.

She never thought it was a *good* lesson, merely valuable. There is a difference, as she herself proved when she first met Paris and stopped being good.

In Saks she's swarmed by cosmetics salesgirls as she tries to get from

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the front doors to the elevators. Scylla and Charybdis must be working on commission: On the one hand she's doused with the latest fragrance, on the other she's beset by unemployed actress/model maenads brandishing jars of overpriced glyceryl stearate-enriched promises. The Galilean would be shocked to learn that there can be no true miracles without faith *plus* retinol. She reads all the fashion magazines, she knows all the lies by heart, but knowledge is never proof against desire. Helen still holds onto a measure of magic, the last scrapings of her old powers. She *wants* to believe that if she stares long enough into the eyes of the painted waifs in the print ads and invokes Aphrodite while anointing herself with the prescribed creams and potions, she'll be granted the means to draw unto herself some measure of the models' youthful appeal and once more be the woman for whom empires tumbled and cities burned. And why not? This is America. Money is the greatest magic of them all.

It's just too tiresome a gauntlet to run if she wants to ascend to the Olympic heights of Better Dresses. She decides to dress for the evening out of the garments she's already got on hand. Just so her foray into Saks won't be for naught, she buys a spray bottle of *eau de* wishful thinking from an older saleswoman, a condescending creature with an affected accent that staggers back and forth between Merrick and Marseilles. Her face bears one less layer of shellac than the silver-blue nightmare roller coaster of her hair, but she seems to think she's caught her youth by the wings and captured it in amber.

"Are you *sure* you couldn't use something else?" she asks Helen as she slides the charge slip across the glass-topped counter. "Something for your face? We have a fabulous new line of renewal creams. I've dropped a few samples for mature skin into your bag. You *must* try them; they work wonders. I wanted to include a moisturizer, but I've only got the line-preventer left; the line-repair samples are all gone."

Helen signs the receipt and smiles.

"I don't like bullies," she tells her. "Especially not clumsy ones like you. You're old, and you never were beautiful; I can tell. I've got an eye for these things, if nothing else. Don't worry, it could have been worse. You might have been beautiful once, and now all you'd have left would be flimsy memories of how you used to — Oh, for the love of liposuction, are you *never* going to give me back my AmEx card, you troll?" She snatches

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the snip of plastic from the goggle-eyed harpy's claws and strides out of Saks, swinging her hips in a manner sure to make aspiring pop music hos blush, lust, and/or take notes. She takes a small, blithe satisfaction in knowing that the baby vixens of a thousand videos can gyrate the goods till they start to sag from the sheer stress of all that centrifugal force, but they'll never have what Helen's got.

Just youth, the Furies whisper in her ear. She smells the breath of stale blood on their lips and knows that they're grinning. *Just youth*. Helen goes home weeping.

She deals with the tears before turning her attentions to the long, leisurely, scented bath, the freshly changed Porthault sheets, the bed itself sprinkled with rose petals. She lavishes herself with all the layers of fragrance that the fashion magazines recommend: Bath oil to body lotion, dusting powder to cologne to pulse-point perfume, Tinker to Evers to Chance for the grand slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am of love. It's astonishing that there's a man left unmarried out there, given all the play-by-play advice available in the glossies for landing the poor dumb brutes.

Her escort comes to pick her up at seven, as promised. He's in his late twenties and has the sort of pouty Bad Boy looks that Achilles would have been all over in a Myrmidon minute. She knows that when he smiles at her, compliments her looks, offers her his arm, he's only doing it because he's been bought and paid for. She smiles back, and tells herself she doesn't matter, it doesn't care.

Oh. Oopsie. Silly Helen. Stupid Freud.

Their evening is the same as many she's hired in the past: Drinking and dining and drinking and dancing and drinking and drinking and sex. You can't beat the classics. She has him take her to the Rainbow Room where there's still some hope of hearing dance music that doesn't make her guts tighten up into granny knots. This is followed by a session at the Algonquin where a smoky-voiced *chanteuse* croons jazzy torch songs that gently call up the dead. Helen sits cozied next to her boytoy not because she craves the nearness of him, but because the summoned spectres are hogging all the room.

"This is nice," she says, breathing in the fumes from her VSOP cognac, breathing in the music, breathing in the ghosts. "This is nice, but it's not the Stork Club."

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"Huh?" says her date. And even in that automatic grunt, he manages to let her know that he really doesn't give a damn.

Helen is unfazed by this. "The Stork Club," she says again. "It was a wonderful place, a nightclub, special, beautiful, glamorous. Everyone who was anyone went there, and if you were *really* somebody, they'd let you into the Cub Room." She smiles, remembering being there, being that.

"Oh," her escort says, nodding, pressing together plump, ripe lips that are sometimes his meal ticket. "Sure, I understand: Like Studio 54. My mom always talks about Studio 54."

"Huh?" says Helen.

That's when he tells her she's the most beautiful woman in the world. It's only an accident that she catches him checking his watch just before he says that he really can't control himself much longer, he wants to get her alone, he wants her, and can they go back to her place now. She puts on a smile that's just as sincere as his recitation of work-for-hire desire and orders another drink instead.

Let her wait. Let that little girl, that child he's hoping to rendezvous with after he's serviced Helen, wait. (Helen knows there's another woman on his mind; he wears anticipation like aftershave.) Helen's paid her dues at the woman's waiting game: Waiting to marry; waiting for Menelaus to finish his business with her body and let her sleep; waiting for Paris to get a clue that she *was* willing, and not just because Aphrodite was pulling the strings; waiting for the war to start, to end; waiting to hear Menelaus's verdict pronounced against her when the Achaeans finally took Troy and brought her back from the burning walls to stand before her sour-eyed cuckold.

That was when she'd made the waiting stop. Then, with Paris dead and kindly Hecuba driven barking mad, with Hector's little son thrown from the heights of the city's parapet, fragile skull and bones shattered on the rocks, solely because Agamemnon feared the possibility that those infant hands might someday take up sword and shield and vengeance.

That was when, with a flash of insight worthy of the best and brightest of Daddy's thunderbolts, Helen saw how much her husband's angry face had aged during the war years. He hadn't been a Cretan wall painting when she'd married him, but now he reminded her of a cured olive, so brown and wrinkled, hiding something hard and bitter at the core.

The legends claimed that her next move was sly and calculated,

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altogether womanly: She told him that if he wanted her dead she'd make it easy for him by giving his sword an unobstructed path to her heart. With those words she'd opened her gown, baring her breasts to the sun. They were perfect, firm despite all the children that she'd borne and suckled, white and round as ewe's-milk cheeses. Menelaus took one look and the bitter old man felt a sudden stiffening in the loins that made the most blood-soaked, smoke-stained Mykenaean soldier look up from the Trojan woman he was raping and smile indulgently.

Sure, she's the reason why so many of our friends are dead, why we've wasted ten years of our lives at the business of slaughter, but just get a load of those tits! Don't try telling me *that's not worth fighting for!*

Helen's breasts are still pretty hot stuff, not that her escort will even notice. She makes a private bet with herself — his tip, double or nothing — that this handsome little sprat will either insist on the dusky mercy of candlelight in the bedroom or no light at all. She can almost hear him muttering his excuses in her ear, pleading Romanticism in the first degree when the truth is a charge of Premeditated Disgust. He'll screw an old woman for money, but *look* at that body first? Gross.

And the saddest part of it all is that he'll never know what he's missing. The face that launched a thousand ships is somewhat on the skids, but from the collarbone down, Helen is still Zeus's child. The flesh has dwindled here and there, but nowhere that counts, and the skin is still a creamy, rose-tinged white as smooth as any statue's skillfully sculpted arse-and-altogether.

Helen finishes her drink and sets the drained glass down slowly, deliberately stretching out the gesture just because she can. She lowers her silver-shadowed eyes and gives her pretty boy a surreptitious sideways glance through a jungle of false eyelashes and three coats of mascara: He's pouting. Let him pout. Let him learn patience and the womanly art of waiting. Slowly she uncoils her bones from the sweet, soft embrace of the lounge chair and smiles. "Shall we go?"

She doesn't step into the cab he hails and there's nothing he can do about it: She's the one in charge these days, much good it's done her. "Let's walk," she says. "There's something I want to show you." He trots along beside her as docilely as dear little Aggie ever did on walkies. Aggie always wanted to be fed, too.

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She brings him to a little pocket park on East 53rd Street near Fifth Avenue. It's night, but it's a New York City night and that's a beast of a neon stripe. Shadows are not allowed to haunt the richer parts of this city any more than stars are allowed to lend its aging face the charity of their light. Helen takes her escort by the hand and sighs.

"This is where it used to be," she says, gazing into the park, into the past. "This was where we came to the Stork Club. Everybody who was anybody, plus tourists and out-of-towners, but the *real* people, the ones who shared the secret, we knew our own. It was Sherman Billingsley's place and sometimes he'd throw a Balloon Night. He'd fill the room with balloons and stuff each one with a dollar bill, a ten, a twenty, a hundred, or maybe just a slip of paper with a prize for you to claim. My God, some of those starlets would body-check like hockey players just to get their claws on one! Walter Winchell was there, and Ethel Merman, and the whole *Who's Who* of Hollywood and Broadway and even Washington, D.C. When that terrible little man assassinated President Kennedy I cried because I kept remembering how I'd met him here, how young and sweet and handsome he was, how gracious, how funny, and now...how lost."

She tries not to cry over that memory. She tells herself she's had centuries of practice at holding back tears. So many loves lost to her, so many friends, her own children, all gone. And the tears come anyway, because now she has to weep over the realization that she's no longer able to mourn for anyone but herself.

She brushes away the tears with bare knuckles, ruefully recalling vanished evenings when she'd sooner be caught dead than without gleaming satin gloves sheathing her arms from elbows to fingertips. "I always wore my finest gowns to go there, something by darling Oleg or Schiaparelli — my favorite was midnight blue silk, strapless, with a tulle overskirt scattered with tiny stars. All right, all right, they were rhinestones, but still...." A sigh. "This is pretty — " She gestures at the little park. " — but it's not the same. Am I so wrong to miss the elegance? The chivalry? The way we took pains to be beautiful for each other? I had a white fox fur stole that lay against my cheek soft as summer clouds and when my date lit up my cigarette for me, no one glared at us as though we drowned kittens for a living."

Helen's escort stands behind her while she speaks and rests his hands

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on her shoulders. They're strong hands, and when they tighten their grip ever so slightly, so tenderly, she smells the vanished breeze from the Middle Sea and Paris's sunwarmed skin. When this beautiful boy murmurs, "I know what you mean," his sympathy is almost more than she can bear. Every fiber of her heart aches with something neither joy nor sorrow but the terrifying essence of both at once when he adds, "I understand. I do."

And by his lights, he does, because the next words out of his mouth are: "They won't let you smoke anywhere in this city anymore. It sucks."

He understands, he does, in exactly the same way that gaudy rhinestones on an old blue dress are boundless galaxies of stars. Helen steps out from under hands that are only a rental of companionship, pulling a phantom fox fur stole a little closer up around her face. "Let's go," she says, her words only a bit less sharp than shattered glass.

They go back to her apartment in a cab that reeks of raspberry air freshener. The driver's walled away from his passengers by a panel of grimy plastic and he's talking on his cell phone in a tongue whose ancestor is kin to the language Helen used when she scolded the slaves back at Troy. She doesn't really notice: She's elsewhere. The band leader at the Stork Club's just struck up "Embraceable You" and she's given herself up into the arms of a man she thinks she likes enough to marry, so she will. He doesn't know it yet, poor lamb, and he'll probably go to his grave believing their life together was all his idea. In her memories, Helen closes her eyes and fills her nostrils with the raspberry-free scent of bay rum and Wildroot Cream Oil, lets her face recall the feel of dancing cheek-to-cheek with a man who's had his beard cleanly scraped away by the hot-towel-bearing attentions of a professional barber. She's caught up in a dream of cufflinks and collar stays, dancing into the wee small hours with a stop at the Automat afterward for pie, or sunrise breakfast at Child's.

Back in her apartment, Helen loses her bet: Her escort makes no mention of candles, no move to turn off the lights. He pours her a drink and offers it with such gallant style that for an instant she believes he's actually been paying attention.

So he has, but not to her words at all.

He's a competent lover, efficient where it counts, leisurely where it's

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an unavoidable necessity. Somewhere between their first kiss and her orgasm, Helen starts to see him through a flurry of masks like falling apple blossoms, his face wearing one by one the faces of every man who's ever shared her body. It's rather dizzying, so she slips into sleep on the crest of her climax as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

She wakes to find that he's gone. By an amazing coincidence, so is most of her jewelry. Helen's head reels as she sits up in bed, though it's less from the shock of discovering she's been robbed than from the after-effects of the drug he put in her drink, the lousy rent-a-romp bastard. She notes that her apartment has been rifled with thoroughness and care. This is no vulgar burglary, with the contents of her closets and drawers tossed everywhere, but an almost considerate invasion of her possessions: He's taken everything in her jewelry box and the pieces she wore tonight, but beyond that he's only rummaged through the top drawers of both nightstands and her bureau.

Well, that's a relief, in a way: It means she needn't get angry enough to kill him.

She could do it. She's a demi-goddess from a family that always did have anger-management issues. Her half-siblings, Artemis and Apollo, slaughtered Niobe's fourteen children merely because that foolish woman bragged about having whelped so many while their mother Leto only had two. *Sensible* divinities would have chalked up such *braggadocio* to the squirrely hormones of all those pregnancies. *Kindly* gods would have shot Niobe's husband. But that wasn't the Olympian way.

No wonder the Galilean took over so easily: He might have had a temper, but he was much better at keeping it in check. His only hands-on victim was a fig tree. His far more effective method of punishing offenders was to give them visions of hell.

Now there's a thought. Helen is old, but not too old to be past learning useful lessons, even when they come from her hereditary Foe.

She pads into her walk-in closet and reaches up into the shadows to pull a flimsy chain. Wavery light from a lone bulb, slightly loose in its socket, blooms over a pair of magnificent wings. Stored away with love and just a hint of mothballs, they hang encased in a clear plastic garment bag from B. Altman's. The plastic's yellowing and the zipper balks — that cherished old department store is now a library, offering books instead of

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ballgowns — but the wings retain the whiteness of Zeus's own thunderbolt.

Standing naked in the middle of her bedroom floor, at the heart of her first and greatest and only place of power, Helen sweeps them around her like a cape and lets them settle lightly onto her back as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a woman to wear the plumage of a swan. For her, it is. This is her birthright as Zeus's child, the wings he wore when in swan's shape he took Leda's love by storm. Now they're Helen's keepsake. Daddy always was one to give strange gifts. Just because you're the king of gods and men doesn't mean you know how to shop.

Helen sighs happily despite the pain she feels as the wings take root. The thousand hungry, thrumming fibers that pierce her flesh tell her that there's still enough power in the great pinions to serve her purpose. (A pity they're so impossibly uncomfortable for long hauls, or Miami winters wouldn't be beyond her reach. A shame she can never be Florida's first literal snowbird.) They'll carry her swiftly where she needs to go, but she'll feel each beat of the great wings as an echoing ache in her bones. Every power — myth or magic, legend or love — demands its sacrifice.

This one is worth it.

What's magic but the gift to transform reality? Helen's beauty is her magic, her immortality, fading but not yet gone. Now, with wings in place, she closes her eyes, spreads her arms wide enough to embrace the world that is already her unknowing slave, and invokes the full measure of her power. Gold flashes at her neck and wrists and waist and ankles. A diadem radiating glory equal to Apollo's own tries and fails to outshine the splendor of her hair. She's been alive long enough to know that it's not just what you can do, it's how good you look while doing it: Silver and gold, spangles and glitter, flags and fireworks. Appearances *do* count, often for everything. All women guard the same dark mystery, the source of life within them, but men and gods don't spill roses into the lap of the girl with the pilly sweater, the scruffy hair, the dull skin and the great personality. Go figure. Go learn the hard way.

Helen steps through a window that is suddenly a door and takes flight. The air above the island is cold, but she rejoices in it. Old's not dead, and every sensation that the waking world can throw her way is further proof that she's alive to relish it. She exults in the icy light of the Artemis-abandoned

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moon. The blend of blood and ichor in her veins is a crimson river holding far greater powers than silly parlor tricks like swan-winged flight. Even at this height it's no trouble at all to track him, to find him, to hunt him down. His scent is a beacon that broadcasts his presence until she pinpoints it, folds her wings, and drops back to earth with the swiftness and grace of a spear. In next to no time she's standing on the sidewalk outside the bar that reeks of his raw youth. There's only a door between them now.

Helen, is this wise?

She stops in her tracks, one hand extended to push the door open. Mortals are lucky: All they've got to deal with is an Inner Child. Helen's saddled with an Inner Athena. It wouldn't be so bad if it were the Voice of Reason, but like her haploid half-sister it's closer to being the Voice of I Know Better than You.

(It could be worse. It could be Athena in person, forever flaunting her knowledge, eternally arrogant in her virginity. How it must have rankled that dried-up bitter husk of a goddess to know that all her intellectual allurements couldn't bribe Paris into forking over the golden apple of Discord! Hera offered him dominion over the world, Athena tried tempting him with the gift of wisdom, but when Aphrodite promised him the high road to Helen's thigh-warded paradise, he tossed her the prize with one hand while dropping his loinwrap with the other.

The crowning irony of the whole Judgment of Paris situation was this: That the apple itself was earmarked *For the Fairest*. Not *For the Smartest* or *For the Most Likely to Succeed in World Conquest*, no. Even so, for all her high-hat egghead snobbery, her eternal touting of the value of brains over beauty, Athena *wanted* that damned apple. As brilliant as she was, as secure in her goddesshood, all she wanted was for someone to tell her that she was...pretty.

As for Hera, she proved to be another sore loser. Helen still remembered asking Daddy's snooty wife about why she'd taken the Judgment so badly. Wasn't she still the queen of the gods? Didn't that count for more than possession of some gilt-dipped pippin? What need to bring destruction down on Troy and all the innocents behind its walls just because *one* Trojan prince let Little Paris do all his thinking for him?

Hera had looked down that perfect nose of hers at her husband's

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beautiful by-blow, sniffed haughtily, and said, "You wouldn't understand, child. It was the *principle* of the thing." And Athena, toadying at Hera's elbow, nodded agreement so vigorously that her helmet fell off.

Helen sighs. The *principle* of the thing is something to invoke when you need high-sounding excuses with which to bless a war you were going to fight anyway. She had enough of *that* patented hypocrisy three thousand years ago.

What she's about to do might not be wise, but it will be effective, straightforward, and sincere. The gods would never understand, but the gods are gone. She casts off Athena's unseen, overbearing presence and steps through the doorway into a watering-hole so vulgar and tawdry that its patrons take perverse pride in how blatantly it reeks of cheap beer, sour wine, and drinks the color of a smog-drenched L.A. sunset. If these people glitter at all, it's only when the lights hit a galaxy of steel studs on scores of ears and eyebrows and waggling tongues. It's a far, far cry from the Stork Club.

He's standing at the bar, still wearing his tux — she specified he was to wear a tux when she hired him — and he's completely ruining those trim, elegant lines of haberdashery by the amount of swag he's got crammed into the pants. Those are her diamonds in his pocket; he's *not* going to be happy to see her.

She passes through the crowd without incident. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but only when beauty consents to be seen. The other patrons of the club don't seem to notice that a winged woman all ashine with gold has come into their midst. He's the only one who sees her as she is, and as she comes nearer she's pleased to note how his first fear-drenched sight of her intensifies when he realizes nobody else sees anything frightening at all. He's isolated in his terror. She savors the instant when his expression turns to that of a man questioning his own sanity.

As Helen predicted, her faithless boytoy's got his chosen ladylove with him — a spiky-haired little dollop of mincemeat whose arm he grabs in a death-grip as he blurts out a string of spit-flecked questions: *Look there! Can't you see it? The naked woman? The wings? Are you blind?* The girl takes one gander at her crazed lover's wildly rolling eyes and lets out a shriek fit to put the harpies off their feed. Her pasty haunches shoot her out the door before Helen gets within arm's reach.

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Helen grabs her escort's face with both hands and draws him toward her until she can smell the tequila on his breath and he can smell the blood on hers. She has the power to hold men helpless with her gaze. In Helen's eyes they see everything they ever loved reduced to a shadow dancing over windblown grass, here and gone, here and gone.

"It wasn't all that good," she tells him, and for an instant he forgets his panic, scowling at her mightily, the picture of indignation and wounded pride. Is *that* what he thinks she means, that she's come here solely to give him poor marks for his amorous skills? That's so stupid, it's almost cute. She makes matters clear: "The Stork Club. If you looked just under the surface, there were constant troubles with the unions and the mobs and the day-to-day ugliness that people used to think was simply the way things were, back then, the way things would and should always be. Josephine Baker sued because she claimed she was refused service. Oh, that's right, I'd have to *tell* you: She was black. Afro — African-American. At the Stork Club you could mix vichyssoise with *hung yan gai ding* for dinner and top it off with spumoni, but you'd better not dream of mixing with people who didn't...belong." Her laugh is bitter enough to come from Athena's cold, unkissed mouth. "You could order smoked sturgeon for three dollars, *foie gras* for five, and Beluga caviar for seven-fifty, but if you walked over to the table where J. Edgar Hoover was stuffing his face and told him what you thought of him there wouldn't be enough money in the world to save your hide."

Helen releases her hold. Her escort staggers back a step, but that's all. Her eyes command him, hold him captive. He gazes into them and learns that there are deaths in this world that the body survives, whether it wants to or no. "It wasn't all that good," she says again. "But it was the last place on Earth where I was still as beautiful as I'd ever been, the last place where people would remember me as I was. If it's gone, that's gone too."

She reaches over the bar and retrieves a golden goblet that was never there, ta-*daaaah*! Its amber liquor's heady with the scent of flowers. "Nectar," says Helen. "The drink of the gods themselves, their immortality. One sip, and today becomes forever." She drinks it down before he can beg for a taste, then smiles at him. Her lips are still moist with eternal life, but her eyes brim with mortal sorrow.

"Little man, can you predict the day that brings your death?" she asks.

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"Do you know that it might be any day at all, including this one? Oh, I'm sure you never really *worry* about such things — you'd go crazy if you did, or worse, you'd get wrinkles. And how can you even begin to think about all the other deaths awaiting us? The death of grace, of glamour, of heedless joy, of youth and love and beauty, and finally the death that comes for the life that encompassed them all, the death even immortals fear, the death that sweeps away every sweet, familiar, comforting bit of the world you knew, but still leaves you behind.

"That last night at the Stork Club I had no idea at all I'd wake up the next day and see my first wrinkle, a tiny crease just between my eyebrows, a line not so deep as a well nor so wide as a blah-blah-blah, and yet...."

She shrugs as her voice trails off. The empty goblet vanishes from her hand as she reaches for his face again. He gasps and whimpers at her touch, trying to squirm away. Helen slaps him once, sharply, to silence him, because he sounds just like little Aggie, and the memory threatens to make her pity him.

Pity is the Galilean's turf; Helen's is beauty. Love knows compassion, but beauty neither pities nor forgives.

"Oh, grow up," she tells him. "And grow old."

Her lips are on his too suddenly for him to struggle or break free, the film of nectar sweet on his unwilling tongue. It seeps into his body, trickling through the dark red passageways until it finds a hospitable place in a disused corner of his mind. There it bubbles up as an eternal spring whose waters will fill his thoughts through the long, dark years to come with: *Is that a gray hair* there, *of all places*? and *Was that* my *kickass music on the "Easy Listening" station*? and *Someday everyone who remembers I was handsome will be gone*. And once those murmurs have been with him long enough so that he can almost ignore them, only then will the stream bring forth the hydra at its heart: *Why are those people looking at me like that, like I'm something they don't want to think about, something tainted, like I'm carrying some disease without a cure? Why are they looking at me like I've never been anything but old?*

Of course he assumes he's poisoned, and so he is, but not in any way he could ever imagine. He's got his cell phone beeping out the 911 overture so fast that he bumps the tip of Helen's perfect nose when he flips the unit

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open. She leaves him to it and turns away, picking a path between the puddles of nastiness on the club floor.

Outside once more, she shucks the swan's wings. Created in the blaze of a god's desire, their power subsides as Helen's passion for payback dwindles to embers of contentment with a job well done. Obliging a lady, they transform into a tasteful Aquascutum trenchcoat over something self-indulgent by Versace. The gold adornments decking her body re-accessorize themselves into Blahnik shoes and a Vuitton purse with enough cash inside for cabfare and a way-past-midnight snack.

Magic, like menopause, takes a lot out of a girl, and like having children, sometimes it seems to be more trouble than it's worth. She doesn't feel like going straight back home, just in case her Inner Athena's lurking there in ambush with a stern *Was that* really *necessary*? *Weren't you* overreacting *just a tad*?

Yes it was. No she wasn't, and she's sick and tired of people presuming that any time a woman past a certain age stands up for herself she must be *over*reacting. What counts as simple *reacting*, then? Lying down on the floor and writing thank-you notes for all the lovely footprints on her face?

Helen doesn't want to review what she's done. Having sat through all those years of Menelaus' postwar post mortem (a.k.a. "And *then* I slew —) she's never had the desire to endure any more debriefings, even with herself, unless real briefs are involved. Anyway, she let the jerk keep the jewelry. Maybe he can hock it for some psychotherapy sessions. She'll ask him about it the next time she runs into him, say in a century or two. If he's really miserable perhaps she'll pity him enough to suggest that he get himself a dog.

She hails a taxi and directs the driver to take her to an all-night diner near her apartment building. Seating herself at the counter, she orders coffee, orange juice, scrambled eggs, a slab of dead pig, whole wheat toast, a bowl of oatmeal with cream and a crash-dump of brown sugar, and a cherry Danish. The man seated two stools over from her thumbs back the brim of his cap and surveys her meal with admiration that's as genuine as the butter soaking her toast.

"Not exactly on the Atkins, huh?" he says, grinning.

He's wearing much-laundered jeans and a blue polyester jacket with the name of a plumbing service embroidered on the back and RAY in a white

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oval over the breast pocket. His mustache is as steely gray as what Helen can see of his hair. She's willing to wager that his cap's concealing a bald spot that's growing at about the same rate as his belly, but she also gets the feeling that he takes pains to choose shirts that are long enough to stay tucked in when he bends over on the job.

There's a younger man with him, a man with gleaming coal-black hair, a smooth face, a taut stomach, a tight butt, and the ability to take a woman to bed without asking her to be patient, just a minute, wait, sometimes it takes me a little while to get started. That young man would never dream of earning his living by reaming out other people's drains. In spite of this, that young man is also wearing that baseball cap, those jeans, that blue polyester jacket with the oval that says RAY. He's seated on the same stool as the man who speaks to Helen, and he's smiling at her too.

Helen smiles back. "I'd offer you some," she tells him. "But I'm going to eat it all, every bite."

"That's good," he says. "That's what I like to see. Like I always say, a beautiful woman's got to keep her strength up. Uh, if you don't mind my saying so. That part about you being a beautiful woman, I mean."

"It's a free country," Helen tells him. "And you're entitled to your opinion." She laughs.

He's got clean plates in front of him, but he makes it a point to order a cherry Danish for himself and a refill on coffee, just so he has an excuse to linger on. When Helen tries to get her check from the waitress, he executes an interception worthy of a SuperBowl M.V.P.

"Look, I'm not trying to pull anything funny," he tells her. "It's just, well, how often do I get the chance to do something nice for a real lady these days?"

Helen rests one elbow on the counter, cups her chin in her hand, and gazes into a human face that like her own is young and old, fresh and faded. Paris stands at her back, tenderly passing ghostly fingers through her hair. The stories all claim he was a gloriously handsome young man, but facts are facts: He was abandoned in the mountains, raised on a farm, not in a palace. His face was chapped by wind and cold, his skin deeply scarred from cowpox, his nose broken and badly healed after a difference of opinion with the family bull, his hair sunbaked and brittle, his teeth chipped and stained where they weren't altogether missing, and he never

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did have any fashion sense. Would a handsome young man have believed he'd need *anyone's* help to get himself a beautiful woman, even Aphrodite's? Yet if the truth be told, Paris never did need the goddess to stack the deck for him with Helen. What she sees in Ray, she saw in him. She's surprised it's taken her this long to see it again. Live and live and live and learn.

The band is playing a rumba but — song cue be damned — Helen *does* hear a waltz. Her lips curve up as the waiter slips a dish of caviar in front of her and bright, prize-filled balloons tumble from the ceiling.

"Darling — " Her breath stirs the soft cloud of fox fur at her throat as she reaches across the table for his hand. "Do you remember the Stork Club?"

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Charles Fort speculated that the Earth is a farm and we are all someone's property. Here's a story that carries that line of thought off on a tangent.

Speaking of tangents, Mr. Haldeman says that when he began writing this story, it was a beautiful day on a topless beach outside Barcelona. He mentions this fact as proof that his priorities are hopelessly warped.

One of our best-known contributors, Joe Haldeman's many novels include The Forever War, Tool of the Trade, The Hemingway Hoax, *and most recently,* Camouflage. *His new novel,* Old Twentieth, *should be out around the time this issue hits the stands.*

Foreclosure

By Joe Haldeman

WHEN YOU'RE IN REAL estate, you have to be a people person. Often that means nodding and smiling through people's delusions, waiting to talk them back down into something they can actually afford.

But financial delusions are one thing, and actual nut cases are something else. That's what I thought I was in for the day Baldy walked into my life.

I'd only been an actual broker for a couple of months, though I'd been in real estate for many years part-time, and more than two years full-time, since my husband passed away. So I would have told you by then that nothing could surprise me.

I could usually tell if customers were serious before they even opened their mouths, as soon as they walked through the door. Single males were usually not. So when a balding portly middle-aged man walked in one hot August day, sweating profusely and fanning himself with a newspaper, I just put on my neutral smile and decided to let him enjoy the air conditioning for a while.

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He didn't respond to my greeting, but just plopped down in the chair in front of me and stared, brow furrowed. He didn't blink, and he seemed not to have any eyebrows.

When he spoke, his lips barely moved. "You deal in the transfer of land."

"Well, sure. We help landowners — "

"Owners." He shook his head stiffly. "No one owns anything. You sit on our land and spoil it."

I looked at him closely. "Are you a Native American?"

He leaned forward, peering. I thought about the pepper spray in my bag in the bottom drawer.

"One of you? No. I just look this way. Just for now."

"I'm afraid I don't follow."

He nodded again. "You will follow." He reached inside his sweat-stained seersucker suit and my hand dropped — casually, I hoped — toward the bottom drawer.

He brought out a cylinder that was actually three rolled-up photographs. When he unrolled them, they somehow snapped as flat and stiff as plastic placemats.

He dealt them out in front of me like three large playing cards. I took one look and my heart actually stopped for a couple of beats.

They were three-dimensional and moving. Not like 3-D movies or comics or any such foolery. Each picture was like a window.

He tapped on the first one, hard. "This is what was here when we first...arranged for the land." It was a volcanic wasteland, like I saw on a *National Geographic* special on Hawaii. "When it was first ceded." Ceded or seeded?

He thumped the second one, which was an Edenic forest. "This is here now, a few hundred, maybe one hundred times ago. Just yesterday."

He pushed the third one toward me.

"This is what you have done." It was downtown, a couple of blocks from my office, the lunchtime traffic jam. I could almost smell the exhaust.

I picked up the picture and brought it closer to my face. I *could* smell the exhaust! There was a muted sound of traffic. The other two had faint aromas, too, arboreal humus and sharp brimstone.

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"Impressive." I stacked them together and put them in the middle of the table. I didn't know what else to say.

"You are an accident. This is not your fault. But this place was clean and perfect, the way we made it. Hundreds of millions of times ago, years ago, when we seeded. It grew green and did oxygen, as we planned. We didn't plan you, though, and you're undoing it."

"Wait." This was something out of my husband's pulp magazines. "You mean the whole planet?"

He nodded. "The place, the planet." He closed his eyes. You could hear the wheels turning in his head. His eyes snapped open again. He still hadn't blinked. "We bought it. We fixed it up. Long before I was born. Now we're ready to move in. But we find *you* here."

"So you're from another planet."

He tilted his head. "Another place. Another time and place. Now *you* have to go to another place."

"I don't get it." Though I was getting it, and not liking it. "Who are you, anyhow?"

"I am like you; I facilitate the transfer of property."

"A *real estate* agent?"

"Yes. Perhaps more like a lawyer." He closed his eyes again, thinking, or maybe translating. "You are undesirable parasites, but you are also sentient creatures. This makes my function more difficult.

"If you were not sentient, we could simply be rid of you. Like you do with bugs. But there are protocols. Laws we have to obey."

"Wait. You could just...get rid of us, like bugs?"

"Easier, really. Bugs are tough. But, as I say, protocols. We have to allow you to leave. To establish yourselves someplace that is not...here and now. Especially here."

"Wait. Move to another planet?"

"Sure. You haven't done that?"

I shook my head. "Well, *no*." This was 1967, the year before the first Moon landing.

"I do it all the time. Nothing to it." He took another cylinder out of his pocket and snapped it flat. "This is the agreement."

I stared at it. "What is this, Chinese?"

He nodded. "There are seven hundred and sixty-three million Chinese

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on your planet. More than any other people. So that is the language of default. Touch the agreement."

I did, and it suddenly turned to English. "How'd you do that?"

"I don't know." He stood up. "It's not my concern anymore." Without even saying good-bye, he started for the door.

I looked at the document. My name was on the bottom line. It gave us fifty years: on August 14th, 2017, all humans remaining on Earth would be exterminated.

"Wait!" I said. "Who am I supposed to give this to?"

"I don't care. I just had to give it to you."

"I want to talk to your boss." I tried to keep the panic out of my voice. "Your supervisor."

"I don't have a boss."

I picked up the document. "*Someone gave this to you!*"

"Oh. The Council." He clapped twice.

Two old women and an old man appeared, seven feet tall, skinny, dressed in black robes. Their eyes went up-and-down instead of sideways. "What is it this time?" one of the women said.

"She doubts the authority of the foreclosure."

She looked at me very severely. "It is similar to your own laws about land. They were given permission to change its ecology; to develop it. Once developed, they may take possession."

"What about *us*?"

"Sad. Accidents are often sad."

"We don't have any rights?"

She looked at the other two, and then back at me. "Why would you have rights? To put it in your terms, you didn't buy the land. You didn't develop it. You have to move off." The three of them disappeared.

I looked at Baldy. "That's *it*?"

"Simple enough." He opened the door.

"But I'm just a *real estate* agent!"

"So am I." He stepped out into the brightness and faded away like vapor. There was nothing but the hot smell of the street.

It might have been a minute later before I looked down at the document again. It was cool to the touch, and not hard or slick like plastic. My name and address were at the bottom, below two other things that

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might have been signatures, followed by something like Morse code, dots and dashes. The dashes changed in length, though, when I moved my head.

I thought about calling a lawyer. But the language was clear enough, way more clear than a real estate contract. On August 14th, 2017, any humans remaining on Earth would be exterminated. That was the word they used, too; no euphemisms. I would probably be here, at seventy-eight; my family was long-lived on both sides.

Call the police? They'd lock me up.

I opened the filing cabinet and took out my husband's old address book. I took it back to my desk, hands shaking, and finally found the number I wanted, under the letter "J" — Jeremiah. Jeremiah Phipps, the science fiction writer. I'd never actually met him, but he and my husband used to play pool together.

It was almost noon, but the phone obviously woke him up. I don't suppose writers keep bankers' hours, or real estate agents'.

I told him I needed advice about a mysterious object, and asked whether I might meet him for lunch and get his opinion. My treat, I said, at Leonardo's, a pretty good Italian restaurant. That got his interest; he agreed to meet me there at one.

I called another agent to come cover for me, and when she showed up at quarter to one, I took the three photographs and contract in a large envelope and went down to Leonardo's. I'd normally walk the seven blocks, but it was a hundred degrees out. I turned the car's air conditioner on high, and went back to the office for a few minutes. I guess I was helping to ruin the fellow's atmosphere, but it was evidently too late to worry about that.

I was inside Leonardo's cool, enjoying a Coke in a booth that looked out on the parking lot, when I saw the apparition that was Jeremiah Phipps. He had a shaggy gray beard and a mane of gray hair tied back in a ponytail, riding a rusty old bike, wearing cut-off jeans and a Florida Gators T-shirt.

"Very weird." I didn't show him the pictures and contract right off, but first told him how the man had walked in and started talking cryptic nonsense. The two mugs of beer came, and I paused while he drained one of them. I ordered a large deluxe pizza, figuring he could take the leftovers home.

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"I was getting scared," I said. "I thought his manner was threatening. But I guess it was just a language thing."

"He some kind of foreigner?"

"Some kind." I took out the three pictures and laid them down. "How about *that*?"

He picked up one of them, looked at it closely, held it up to the light, looked at the other side. "Hmm."

"Ever seen anything like that?"

He looked at the other two and raked his fingers through his beard. "I don't get it. Three sheets of plastic?"

"What? No, look — this is a prehistoric scene, and this is the traffic at Sixth and University, and this...."

He was looking at me in a funny way. "You see that stuff on them?"

"*In* them! They're three-dimensional, moving. You can even *smell* them!" I picked up the prehistoric one and sniffed deeply, and thrust it at him. "Fire and brimstone!"

He sniffed it gingerly and put it down. "Yeah, um, look...I don't want to pry, but is this maybe an acid flashback? I know how — "

"I've never taken drugs in my life!" The nerve.

He held up a placating hand. "Just tryin' to be scientific here." He handed them back. "Study 'em. They're still the same?"

"Except this one." I turned it over. "You had it upside down." I took the contract out of the envelope. It hadn't changed. "How about this?"

He stared at it, both sides, then sighted down it as if looking for dust on the surface. "Another picture?"

"No. This is a contract. It gives the human race fifty years to get off the Earth."

"Not gonna happen." He squinted at it and then rubbed his beard, calculating. "Three and a half billon people, that's about two hundred thousand a day, call it eight thousand per hour. You couldn't move 'em across town in a bus in that time. Let alone to Mars or wherever." He shook his head and sort of laughed through his nose. "Ain't gonna happen."

"You think I'm crazy."

He riveted me with his eyes, coal black and bloodshot. "I don't say that about people. We all got different ways with reality."

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The pizza came. I ordered two more beers and grabbed one as soon as they came.

He was a pizza-consuming machine, six slices to my two. He couldn't have weighed a hundred-twenty. Maybe he only ate when somebody else was paying.

"What you want to do," he said, lingering over the last piece, "is get some scientists interested in this plastic. There can't be any plastic on Earth that does what you say."

"You believe me."

"Provisionally, yeah. Why would you lie to me? I don't have any money or prestige. Not gonna get any in this life."

He touched the middle one, leaving a little smear of grease. "This is Sixth and University."

"That's right." I dabbed away the fingerprint.

"What you're seeing is the traffic going by there now?"

"Yes. Or I think so. It could be anytime recent, this time of day."

He got up. "Order me another beer. I'm gonna bicycle down there and hold up a certain number of fingers. Then I come back and you tell me how many."

I watched him pedal laboriously away, and ordered another beer and a cannoli. Maybe I could finish it before he got back, using the beer as a distraction.

A few minutes later, he showed up at the intersection. He held up three fingers. He turned around, and behind his back, two fingers in a V.

I'd finished most of the canoli by the time he returned. "You want the rest of that?"

I pushed it toward him. "You held up three fingers and had two behind your back."

He nodded slowly and nibbled at the pastry. "Suppose you don't tell people about the intergalactic real estate man. Suppose you just say 'I'm psychic. You go do anything at the corner of Sixth and University, and I'll look at this piece of plastic and tell you what it is.'"

"They'd say I had a hidden camera."

He sipped his beer. "Wouldn't do you any good if you were sitting in a newspaper office. A television station."

"A laboratory," I said. "I want scientists to pay attention."

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"Uh-huh. First you got to *get* their attention." He drank half the beer and set it down hard. "What time you get off work?"

"Five."

"Got a card? A business card?" I fished through my purse and gave him one. "I know some people," he said. "I'll call you."

He showed up right at five in a car driven by a younger man. It was a dusty old black Chevrolet with a magnetic sign on the door advertising a local television station. A black car in Florida? Cheap, I presumed.

The boy had a big smile, and I couldn't blame him for that. Looking forward to some fun. He said they had a thing, a "spot," scheduled for right after the 6:30 commercial. I said that was fine and reached in to shake his hand. That's when I saw the second young man in the back with a bulky camera.

"Randall Armitage," the driver said to me. "Have you ever met me before?"

"No," I said apologetically. "I don't watch much television. What is this?"

"He's taking a movie of you, uncut from now until the demonstration. Is that all right? John Buford Marshall."

I shrugged. He didn't have air conditioning, but it wasn't that far to the station. I got in and sneezed from the dust. "Let's go," I said. "Don't spare the horses."

We parked near the entrance to the TV station and the driver helped the cameraman, carrying a heavy battery for him. They both walked backward, taking a picture of me crunching down the gravel walk. "This is not going to be very exciting," I said. "Walking."

"It's not part of the show," Jeremiah Phipps said. "It's for the scientists afterward." Randall gave an unambiguous smirk. That firmed my resolve. I wanted to see the look on their faces later.

We sat down in a studio that was shabby everywhere the camera couldn't see. The announcer's desk itself was clean and smelled of lemon furniture polish. "Can I get you a coffee?" Randall asked, and I nodded, laying out the three pictures. A woman with a clipboard sat down behind us all without introducing herself.

The coffee smelled great, but as I raised it to my lips I asked, "Will I be able to go to the bathroom?"

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" 'Fraid not," the cameraman said. "Not until after the thing."

I set it down. "I'll explain about the three pictures," I said.

"Just the one, please," John Buford said. "The one we can verify."

"Okay." I peered into it. "It's rush hour, of course. Tourists crawl up Sixth Avenue and find they can't turn left on University. Horns honking, as if *that* ever did any good." I looked up. "Of course anybody could tell you that.

"There's a short man wearing a straw boater walking a huge dog across the street. It's a Great Dane."

"You should send someone out with a walkie-talkie," Jeremiah said.

Randall nodded but said no. "This is a television thing. Not a radio thing."

"We can do it later," the cameraman said neutrally. "Can you explain how this happened?"

"Sure." I wondered which one of them was in charge. I talked to the camera. "About 11:30 today, a strange-looking man walked into my real estate office. I'm a Realtor for Star Realty on Thirteenth Street." A plug wouldn't hurt.

So I just plunged into the story and told it as accurately as I could remember. I held the sheet up to the camera and described what I could see and smell and hear. Randall looked at me sort of like he was studying a bug. Marshall looked more charitable. The silent woman with the clipboard left.

"We're going to do a simple test first," he said. "I'm going to stand at the intersection and write something on this big sheet of paper." A poster board, actually. "Nobody knows what I'm going to write — *I* don't even know, yet. You tell us what you see. Then our other portable camera, like this one, will show it."

"Okay. Just point the paper north on Sixth. Or turn it around a couple of times."

He left with a teenage boy. "Kind of stupid," I said. "He could have left a note behind. He could have told me hours ago what he was going to write."

The cameraman smiled. "You don't know television, Ma'am. People trust the camera."

"They do," Jeremiah said. "Not like they read books anymore." I could hear a woman reading the news to the camera in the next room.

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After a few minutes, John Buford Marshall smoothed his tie and another man came in to operate the camera. Bright lights snapped on. "Ma'am?" I went up to join him and a woman powdered us both. While she was doing it, he said, "Let me have an oblique two-shot here with space in the lower corner for Randall's insert."

"You got it, boss." Maybe he was the boss. After a minute, the man in the shadows said "In five." Three green lights, an orange and then a red.

"Thank you, Thelma," he said, and conspicuously looked at his watch, in spite of the fact that there were clocks everywhere. "Thank you for the explanation of this ordinary woman's extraordinary talent. Do you see our reporter, Mrs. Hockfield?"

"Oh, yes. He's standing on the sidewalk outside the music store on University. He's talking to the cameraman." I held the plastic close. "Can't quite hear. Still a lot of traffic."

"He should start writing...now." He did, a moment later, and then turned the board around. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Just tell us what you think it says."

"No 'think' about it. It says SHE IS A THETAN."

Jeremiah Phipps said a word I don't think they allow on television.

"Ten seconds now, and the external camera." I was watching his face instead of the monitor. His eyes bugged out in a most gratifying way. "How...how did you...what's a Thetan?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I'm certainly *not* one! I'm a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution."

"Here come the phones," Jeremiah Phipps said. One in the main office rang stridently. Two in the studio blinked angry red lights. "I think you're going to find out more than you ever wanted to know about Thetans."

IT WAS KIND of a joke. It turned out that Jeremiah Phipps knew Randall through science fiction — he was a "fan," not a writer, and Randall decided to play a little science-fictional joke on Phipps.

Over the next few days I heard a lot about Thetans and L. Ron Hubbard, another science fiction writer who discovered this religion, or made it up, Dianetics or Scientology. After news of the message "SHE IS

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A THETAN" got around — especially after the networks picked it up — I had twenty or thirty Scientologists a day come by the office.

As I say, you have to be a people person in this business, and part of that is to live and let live when it comes to religion. In my heart of hearts I don't suppose I really *believe* any of it, not even the Episcopalianism I grew up with — that dried up when my husband died young — but anything that gets you through the day is all right by me. These Scientologists had some pretty strange things to say, and I don't pretend I could follow it all, but they seemed moral and good-hearted.

And they believed me. I couldn't get any scientists past the Thetan thing, but that was all right. The Scientologists believed me. And they bought houses. Boy, did they buy houses. I got gold pins for most property sold every year from 1967 until I retired in 1981. Houses weren't that easy to sell in Gainesville then, in the middle of the state, equally far from the ocean and the Gulf.

After I retired, the Scientologists would still come by. They'd look at the pictures, which I had hanging on the wall, and some of them would claim to see things. Maybe, I don't know.

The picture that was the near past started to change as workers appeared and put a railroad through. That would be back in the 1850s, right in the same place, what would become Sixth and University. If I lived to be into my nineties, I'd see the Civil War come in. They had a battle there.

That wouldn't show up, though, until after August 14th, 2017. When we'd all be exterminated, if old Baldy was to be believed. I hadn't been able to get anybody but Jeremiah Phipps interested in that, and he passed long ago.

But before he died, he gave me an idea. It might work.

I turned seventy-eight in 2017, some the worse for wear but no complaints. On August 14th I put on my best Sunday dress and sat in the living room with a pitcher of iced tea.

Just before noon, Baldy knocked on the door and then walked through it, like mist. He hadn't changed.

"Do not get up. I can see it is not easy."

"Thank you."

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He mopped at his face with a big handkerchief and looked around my rather crowded house. Never could get rid of stuff.

"So what's it going to be?" I said. "Big explosion? Poison gas?"

"What would you prefer?"

"Ice, I suppose, like the poet said. It's been so damned hot."

"I could ask for ice." He sat down on the couch. "May I?"

"Help yourself." He poured a glass of iced tea and drank most of it.

He patted his lips with the handkerchief. "We might as well begin the...."

"Wait. I want to talk to the Council again."

"To what end? You will just bother them."

"You brought them before. This is much more serious."

"Oh, not really. Not to me." He looked annoyed, but he clapped his hands twice. The Council appeared, two seated next to him and a third, perhaps the one I spoke to half a century before, standing in front of the coffee table.

"What is it *this* time?" she said with asperity.

"When last we talked," I said carefully, "you said that your property laws were similar to ours."

"In some ways, yes."

"We have a thing called 'adverse possession.' Squatter's rights."

"I know of this," she said.

"You live on a piece of property for a length of time, continuously, without permission of the owner. 'Open and notorious.' Is that us?"

"That could be argued, of a species that accidentally evolved on a planet owned by someone else. But the agreement with *his* species," she nodded at Baldy, "is the primary one, and was only contingent on their profoundly changing the environment. The ecology."

"That's what he said." I got to my feet, joints popping, and crossed over to the window. I threw the curtains open with a dramatic swoosh.

The sea glittered on the horizon.

"This was a hundred miles inland fifty years ago. Now it's an island. In fifty years, we've changed the Earth's ecology more than his people did in fifty thousand. Five hundred thousand."

She looked out over the sea and nodded.

"But we *planned* it," Baldy said.

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"So did we," I said. "Everybody knew it was going to happen." Perhaps not so soon, I didn't say.

She looked at me and her brow furrowed. "She's telling the truth." To Baldy: "Her case is stronger than yours." The three of them disappeared.

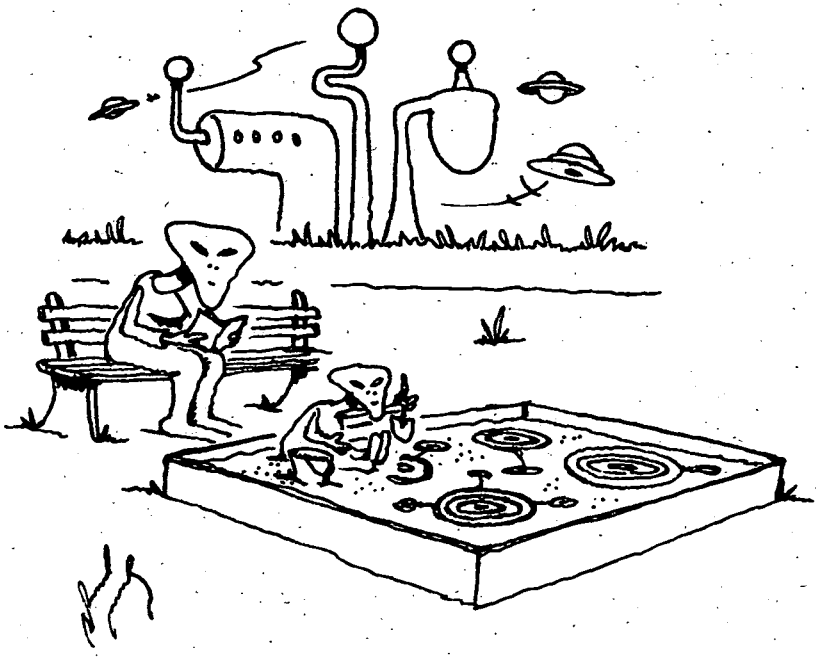
Baldy sat in silence for a moment. He finished his tea and stood up. He went to the window, and nodded.

"Clever. But we do have time on our side. We will return after you are extinct." He stepped to the door. "You will have your ice by then, I think."

He disappeared in a wisp.

I guess we can handle the ice when it happens.

It's a funny thing. When you live on the beach you hardly ever go swimming. I thought this afternoon I might.



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Dale Bailey's latest work comes to us from The Charlotte Observer, *where it was serialized last October in the Catawba Valley Neighbors section. We thought it was unfair that only North Carolina residents should get to enjoy these spooky vignettes.*

Mr. Bailey is the author of The Fallen *and* House of Bones. *His next novel, a thriller entitled* Sleeping Policemen *(written in collaboration with Jack Slay) will be published next summer.*

Spells for Halloween: An Acrostic

By Dale Bailey

H IS FOR HECATE. THE MOON is changeable and strange, and exerts powerful influences. Tides answer her call. Lunatics are said to respond as she waxes and wanes. The moon has two faces, a light one and a dark. In her bright aspect rules Diana, the virgin of the hunt. But in her darker face there reigns another god, unseen by sublunary eyes: Hecate, queen of crossroads, said by legend to reign also in Hell. Darkness falls. The harvest moon climbs the ladder of the sky, and the old year withers. We too have dual faces. We too stand at a crossroads. Good and evil. Darkness and light. There is a goddess in the moon. Pray she doesn't see you.

A IS FOR ABADDON, the Kingdom of the Dead. Madness comes to men too long stranded on the ice. In 1912, Captain Robert Falcon Scott perished following an assault on the South Pole. His journal survives. An unpublished entry preserved in the Rare Book Room of the British Library describes a strange experience. Three days from their final campsite, Scott

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and his remaining men found a stairway hacked into the ice. Down and down and down it wound, into a bottomless abyss, but no one among them dared descend. A stench of brimstone rose up from the sundered earth, the sound of distant screams. No later expedition has confirmed Captain Scott's experience. Of one fact, however, all who brave the frozen continent are certain: Hell is cold.

L IS FOR LILLITH, the Queen of Demons. There are those who believe that Adam had another spouse, summoned out of earth in Eden to be his helpmate. Lillith was wise and lovely to behold, but she was proud as well, and loathe to submit to another's will. Above all things she longed to rule in Eden as her husband's equal. And so she was dismissed from Paradise, condemned to wander alone through the wilderness of a yet-unfinished world. In Eve, Adam found a more suitable mate, and so enjoyed his happiness for yet a while. But Lillith, pining for solace and companionship in her turn, entertained demons, and brought forth a race of witches. In outer darkness, she suckles them still, and waits for her revenge.

L IS FOR LYCANTHROPE. Beware the generosity of strangers. Once upon a time a poor man named Peter, walking in the woods at night, met a stranger on the path. The stranger's eyes were yellow, but his voice was sweet and Peter had from him a kingly gift: a cloak of fine gray fur. On autumn nights it warmed him. But when the moon grew full thereafter, unholy appetites seized him and he could not abide to be indoors. Livestock disappeared, then children. Peter alone, of all the villagers, dared walk in darkness. It is said that Red Riding Hood met him once, in the depths of the haunted wood. These are merely children's tales, of course. But a bloated yellow moon looms in the October sky, and the scent of change is in the air. Wolves walk among us always. The worst among them wear their fur on the inside of their skin.

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O IS FOR OUROBOROS, the great serpent who encircles the world. The ancient Norsemen knew him as Jörmungandr, the Hindu as Sesa. Under earth he lies and under sea, in a cold abyss of stone where no human foot has fallen, in trenches fathoms deep beneath the waves, where no outer light can pierce. Vast fish ply the icy currents, blind behemoths, cyclopean shapes unseen by human eye. Ouroboros dwarfs them. A time draws near when he will awaken and ungirdle the planet at last. Cities will crumble in the deluge. Continents will sink. The earth trembles beneath an October sky. Already Ouroboros stirs.

W IS FOR WENDIGO. There are voices in the wind. The Indians knew them long ago. When polar gales swept down over plains three centuries gone, the Algonquin trembled in their lodges and whispered of the wendigo — of families slaughtered in their beds, of betrayal and blood-stained hands, of hungry spirits in the wind that drove men to murder the ones they loved the most. The Algonquin have dwindled now. But the wendigo is with us still. Have a care when the wind picks up on a chill October night. Lock the doors. Latch the windows. Pull the covers tight. Pray for your loved ones, sleeping in the rooms around you. Try not to think about the knives in the kitchen, or the axe in the garage. There are voices in the wind. Whatever you do, don't listen.

E IS FOR EUNUCHS, the sexless ones. The mush-room people are not born, they grow. Deep in the sewers underneath our cities, far down in the bowels of the planet, they stir themselves to life. Who can say how they came to be, what spore of cast-off intelligence took root and flour-ished there, in that black and fetid muck? But they exist. In their secret cities underneath our feet, they batten on human waste and nurse their hatred of the sunlit regions of the world. Their strength and courage grows. Their plans ripen. Already they creep up into our moonlit streets to snatch unwary late-night walkers and sate more sanguinary hungers. Beware the shadow under the grate. Beware the pad of distant footsteps. The assault draws near.

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E IS FOR EMPYREAN, the farthest reach of heaven. Lucifer fell there, bearer of God's brightest light. For years unmeasurable by any merely human scale, he nursed in silence his cold resentments. And then, taking courage, he laid his plans, gathered to him allies among the host of seraphim, and rose up against the Lord. The Empyrean ran with the blood of angels, and on the field of combat, he fell. Divested of his name and rank among the angels, his light extinguished, he plunged into darkness. With all his bright company he fell, nine days and nine nights, into the abyss, where he took a new name and clothed himself in the likeness of the serpent. In heaven, the Empyrean was restored. But Satan too has his realm, and rules there, consort of the Queen of Hell.

N IS FOR *NECRONOMICON*. Some books should not be read. A century ago, they exhumed it from the dust of a Fourth Dynasty Egyptian tomb. The archeologist who discovered it perished soon afterward. The courier who smuggled it to America was murdered mere hours after surrendering his unlawful charge. It rests now, under lock and key, in the Manuscript Archive of Miskatonic University. The *Necronomicon*, the Book of the Dead: four thousand years forbidden, bound in human flesh, and inked in blood. There are those who long to read the secrets in its pages — who crave to chant its ancient incantations, and summon back to rule among us vile gods long banished to the outer dark. In secret, they plot to possess it. Some books should not be read — but will be.

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Matthew Hughes is the author of several novels, including Fool Me Twice *and most recently,* Black Brillion. *Most of his fiction is set in the penultimate age of Old Earth, which is one eon before the Dying Earth created by Jack Vance. His stories blend elements of fantasy, psychological fiction, crime writing, and science fiction into a mix that has found favor with many of our readers.*

Here we bring you a new tale of Guth Bandar, intrepid but by no means humble investigator of the noösphere. (He has previously been seen in our June 2004 and Feb. 2005 issues, and all three stories will be reprinted soon in The Gist Hunter and Other Stories.*) This time out, Guth's adventures take him to some unwelcoming parts of the noösphere...*

Help Wonted

By Matthew Hughes

GUTH BANDAR HAD ALWAYS liked the red-haired one best. Her figure was not as voluptuous as the blonde's nor was her face as perfect as the raven-haired girl's, but there was an elfin quality to the way she looked back at him over her lightly freckled shoulder, a gamin's wry twist of the mouth, and a glint of mischief to her sea green eyes.

In a moment, he would rise from where he lay in the shade of the coconut palm. He would affect a comic growl and they would respond with giggles. Then the blonde would press fingertips to half open lips and gasp, "Oh!" and the brunette would shriek while the redhead cocked one sun-dappled hip before all three ran laughing into the surf.

The dream always unfolded this way, had done so for all the years since Bandar had found his way into this innocuous corner of the Commons, the great collective unconscious of humankind. There were more erotic Situations than this one, certainly there were more realistic representations of intergender relations, but it was to this Location that Guth Bandar often repaired when life became wearisome and his troubles outweighed his joys.

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There was a sweet innocence to the place. As near as he could tell, the three girls were not even anatomically correct. Their breasts were well enough conceived, although the aureoles were too perfectly round, but in the less obvious places things seemed only sketchily realized. It was the fantasy of a boy still approaching the cusp of manhood: the girls could be chased and finally caught, but after that it all grew a little vague.

Bandar wanted to prolong the moment before commencing the sequence that would inevitably end the Location's cycle. It was not the prepubescent frolic that lured him to this place, but its atmosphere: the aura of naïveté, of a world that had not yet encountered guile and cynicism.

For Guth Bandar had lately encountered both, and in too ample a measure. They had come in the unwelcome form of Didrick Gabbris, his longstanding rival at the Institute for Historical Inquiry, where gathered those who spent their lives exploring the Commons — the noösphere was the technical term — and among whose number Bandar had been glad to count himself.

But now his tenure as an adjunct scholar had been abruptly terminated. He had been required to return his gown and pin and to vacate the little office in the basement of the Institute's connaissarium where he had conducted his researches. The fellows and scholars had ceremoniously turned their backs on him, looking anywhere but at Guth Bandar while he trudged to the great doors of Magisters Hall and departed.

The day should have ended in a triumph, the once-and-forever scotching of the odious Gabbris. But when Bandar had presented his revolutionary thesis — that the collective unconscious had paradoxically achieved consciousness, that the noösphere had become self-aware — the assembled noönauts of the Institute had turned on him. Snorts of disbelief and hoots of derision had battered at Bandar's ears, and the ranks of scholars assembled for the Grand Colloquium had become a sea of outraged faces and shaken fists.

The blonde idiomat came up the beach and offered Bandar a theatrical wink, pursed her full lips in an unwitting parody of eroticism, then turned to flee in anticipation of pursuit. But Bandar smiled wanly and flourished a weak hand. When he remained recumbent beneath the tree, she reformed her lips into a moue of dismissal and went away with what would have been a swish and flounce of fabric had she been wearing any.

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Bandar knew he would soon have to get up and play out the sequence or see the dream dissolve. He had not come to this Location through the noönaut's techniques — a series of recondite mental exercises accompanied by the intoning of specific patterns of notes, called thrans — but by the more mundane expedient of falling asleep and allowing his own personal unconscious to connect him to the Commons. Even so, he was no ordinary dreamer; he could lucidly focus his awareness within a dream so that its figures and events became almost as real as if he walked through his waking life.

Still, there were limits. If he did not get up now and respond to the idiomatic entities' importunings, he would overstress the fabric of this Situation and it would pop like a bubble. He essayed a small growl and put one elbow under him. The three girls tittered and coquetted a few steps away.

"Guth Bandar," said a soft voice beside his ear.

The noönaut felt a shock and a shiver as if an icy finger had trailed up his spine. The girls could not speak — prepubescent boys do not look to their fantasy objects for conversation — and there should have been no other entity within this Location.

In the Commons, when things went wrong they tended to go disastrously, dangerously — and all too frequently — lethally wrong. Bandar did not hesitate but mentally reached for the procedure that would propel him post-haste from the dream into full consciousness. But his cognitive grasp closed on emptiness; something was blocking his technique.

"Stay," said the voice, and now Bandar had to turn to face whatever was there, because one rule every apprentice noönaut learned was always to confront the unconscious. *To run is to be run*, went the old maxim. *To stand is to withstand.*

But when he stood and looked behind him, there was nothing to face down. The voice had come from the jungle beyond the coconut palm, an indifferently realized pastiche of leaves, vines, and creeper that was only slightly more convincing than if it had been painted on stage cloth.

"Who speaks?" he said.

The answer came not in words but as a ripple in the air: the familiar sign that a gate had opened between this Location and some other corner of the Commons. The exit's presence deepened Bandar's worry: he knew

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every inch of this palmy beach and knew that the only way in and out, whether he came as a dreamer or as a conscious chanter of thrans, was eighteen paces to the left of the tree, a spot just past an ornate conch shell washed up above the limit of the surf.

He took stock of his situation. *I am stranded in a dream, bespoke by an unknown entity, and beckoned to enter a gate that ought not exist. My day proceeds from defeat to who knows what further drama?*

A terrible thought occurred to him. *Have I become a natural?* he wondered. It was an accusation that Didrick Gabbris had hurled at him in the Grand Colloquium, and Bandar had shrugged it off as merely another dart of abuse chosen from his rival's copious quiver of epithets and slanders.

Now, standing in the warmth of this generic beach, Bandar felt a shiver and an unaccustomed chill. Could Gabbris have been right?

All humans could visit the collective unconscious and did so nightly; the Commons was where the engrammatic stuff of dreams cohered in nodes and corpuscles called Locations, cyclical and eternal. A minority of humankind could consciously enter the wondrous and dreadful realm in which the composite experience of humanity was gathered and distilled to its essences. That minority was further divided into two classes: one was composed of Institute scholars trained in the techniques of orphic thrans that kept them from being perceived by the noösphere's archetypal inhabitants; the other category comprised the irredeemably insane — psychotics whose shattered personas had merged utterly with one of the primal entities loose in the shared basement of the human mind.

The significant difference between noönauts and the deranged was that the scholars retained an awareness of themselves as distinct from their putative surroundings — Bandar knew the people and things of the Commons were not "really real," though the dangers they posed might be — while loons and ravers could not reliably distinguish between a ravenous vampire and a hapless neighbor, which was why a chance encounter on the sidewalk could move in unexpected directions.

Guth Bandar reminded himself of this crucial distinction as he heard again the whispered summons from the darkness beneath the palms, where the rift in the air still quivered. *Can I be mad,* he asked himself, *if*

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I am willing to consider the real possibility that I am indeed mad? He realized that the question led only to a conundrum: the judgment of the insane must always be suspect; only a sane man's verdict could be relied upon, but a sane man would never pronounce himself mad.

"Guth Bandar," said the soft voice. Bandar thought about fleeing the summons. If he couldn't wake himself up, there was another way out: noönauts who sang their way into the Commons could chant a specific thran that would open an emergency exit. Quite likely the same thran would pluck Bandar from this dream and in a second he would wake up in his bed, doubtless drenched in sweat, his limbs atremble.

But he left the seven notes unsung. Gabbris's victory in the Grand Colloquium had stung Bandar's pride. He was no natural. He was a true noönaut, and he knew that the Commons had indeed communicated with him, as if it were a conscious entity. He had not been able to convince his peers and betters at the Institute, might never be able to do so. But a true scholar does not turn aside when confronted by the inexplicable. He penetrates the mystery.

Bandar squared his narrow shoulders and advanced to the rippling slit in the air. Without hesitation, he stepped through.

BEYOND THE BEACH was a luminous fog, a mist so dense that Bandar's hand, held at arm's length, became a doubtful object. Bandar knew that there were three fog-bound Locations in the collective unconscious: one was a Landscape (or more properly, a Seascape), that featured a ship enshrouded on an archetypal ocean; another had the same combination of elements but was classified as an Event, because the ship ran aground and broke up on unseen rocks, casting passengers and crew into the cold sea; the third was an urban Landscape where the idiomats stumbled on cobblestoned streets, feeling their way along walls of brick and fences of black iron on which the mist condensed and chilled their fingers.

This was none of those three, Bandar was sure, but to be certain he used the noönaut technique that summoned up his detailed globular map of the Commons. He rotated the sphere until he found the Location with the beach and its winsome idiomats, then identified each of the befogged Locations. As he had expected, there was no direct connection from the

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beach to any of the three; he would have had to pass through a Garden, a Class Two Massacre, and a Class One Natural Disaster just to reach the nearest.

Now Bandar refocused his awareness on the sphere and employed another aspect of his noönaut training. The result of his effort should have been to create a small pulsation in the symbol that represented whatever Location he now occupied. But though he applied the method again and then still once more, with increased intensity, not one of the emblems in the sphere responded.

That is impossible, Bandar thought. It meant that he must be in some corner of the Commons that was not on the map. But the noösphere had been fully explored and charted tens of millennia ago. The Great Delineation had been the work of thousands of generations and it had cost the lives of untold numbers of members of the Institute of Historical Inquiry, men and women who had bravely ventured into Locations and been absorbed into their spurious realities before they could ascertain which combinations of tones would screen them from their idiomatic inhabitants' perceptions, or find the way out before the Situation or Event reached the end of its cycle and reformed to begin anew.

Perhaps Gabbris is right, Bandar thought. *Perhaps I have taken leave of my senses and become a natural.* He imagined the uproar that would ensue if he returned to the Grand Colloquium and declared that not only was the Commons aware of its own existence, but that it contained at least one Location that had remained undetected during the vast span of time since the first noönaut, the Beatified Arous, found his way through the Golden Door. *Madness,* he thought, *yet here I am.*

"Not madness," said the soft voice. "Merely something new."

In the fog, the sound seemed to come from all directions and from none. Bandar collapsed the sphere, then turned and peered about him, but there was only the ubiquitous vapor. He looked up to see if he could identify a direction from which the light came, and thus orient himself, but no part of the unseeable sky was brighter than any other.

Now he became aware of a shape a little to his right. He turned to face it, at the same time beginning to chant the four-and-six thran, the sequence of tones that was most commonly effective.

"It will do you no good," said the voice.

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Bandar switched to the seven-and-three.

"Neither will that." The shape was becoming clearer. It was human in size and outline.

He tried the four-four-and-two.

"Nor that." It was moving closer, though Bandar saw no motion that suggested walking. It seemed to float toward him through the mist.

"Who are you?" he said. "What do you want of me?"

"You know who we are," said the voice.

The figure had come close enough for Bandar to see that it was definitely human, but that was its only definite characteristic. Its progress stopped when it was near enough for him to have touched its face, and he stared, trying to bring form and features into focus.

But he could not. The face and figure before him constantly shifted, a set of features appearing and disappearing every second in a constant series of slow dissolves. He saw an old man, a young girl, a scarred warrior, an evil king, a sad-eyed clown, a were-beast, a matron, a shining god. The form beneath the face shifted in harmony, showing him lush robes succeeded by battered armor, replaced by rough-sewn animal skins, which gave way to roseate nakedness supplanted by samite threaded through by gold.

"I know who you are," Bandar said. "You are the Multifacet." He used the term every loblolly apprentice learned in his first week at the Institute. It denoted the crowd of archetypal personas that made up the human psyche and from which every individual assembled a personality, some taking more of this one and less of that one, and everyone's individual mix evolving over a lifetime, as nature and circumstances dictated. But here they were assembled in one vessel.

"Yes." The answer came when the figure was that of a young stripling, the voice breaking to make two syllables out of one.

Bandar let anger infuse his reply. "You are the one who has ruined my career."

A wicked witch-king answered, "But to a purpose."

"No purpose of mine."

"We could give you an argument on that. We contain all that combines to form you, after all."

Bandar folded his arms across his chest. "But we have not arrived at

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'after all,'" he said. "Instead, I am in the springtime of my life, which you have just diverted from the only course along which I ever sought to shape my years."

The shifting faces regarded him through a succession of eyes — sharp, mild, innocent, cunning — then the voice of an aged queen said, "We require you to perform a service. We will reward you, as best we may."

"Reward me? Very well, return me to the Institute's good graces and I am yours."

"We cannot," said a portly toper. "A life at the Institute will not shape you to do what you must do."

"Then how will you repay me for the loss of my heart's desire?"

A bearded prophet answered, "With useful qualities that are ours to bestow: the power to persuade, the knack of winning trust and affection, luck in small things." By the time the speech was finished, the speaker was a sly-eyed rogue.

"None of these came to my aid in the Grand Colloquium."

"Your path does not lead through the Institute."

"My path?" Bandar said. "If it is not mine to choose, by what definition does it remain *my* path?"

"We cannot debate with you," said a slack mouthed idiot that became a proud hierophant. "You are chosen. You must accept."

"And if I will not?"

"You must."

"What is the service you require?"

"We cannot tell you that."

"When would I have performed it and be free of you?"

"Not for many years."

"Then why disrupt my life now?"

"You must have time to grow into the kind of man who can do what must be done."

"What kind of man is that?"

There was no answer. Bandar had had enough. "You abort my career, then offer me trinkets for some service you will not define. I decline your offer. Instead I will awaken now and let you seek out a more credulous implement for your obscure purposes. I recommend Didrick Gabbris."

He opened his mouth to sound the seven notes that would pluck him

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from this nebulous place and let him wake in his bed. But the protean figure before him raised a hand, smooth and full fleshed as it came up, transforming into a black gauntlet as it mimed squeezing with thumb and forefinger. Bandar's throat closed. He could make no sound, not even a moan around the obstacle that his tongue had suddenly become.

A rift opened in the pearly mist. Bandar's eyes narrowed against a burst of raw sunlight, then he felt himself propelled through the node. He fell to his knees and pitched forward. Burning sand stung his palms. Heat swaddled him and the air was thick with the rank odor of stale sweat.

"Up!" said a harsh voice. A line of fire cut across the noönaut's shoulders. He would have screamed if he could have, but his voice was still imprisoned within his chest. The lash came back, this time striking the same flesh and creating a pain that compounded the first to evoke an astonishing effect. Bandar leapt to his feet and looked about him.

The desert stretched in every direction but to his rear, where trees sheltered a substantial town beside a broad river, with grain fields beyond the farther shore. Ahead was a massive pile of masonry, each sand-colored, oblong block as long as Bandar was tall and half his height in cross-section. He could measure their size accurately because just such a block was immediately before him, snared in a net of fibrous ropes and with peeled logs beneath to roll on. The ropes went forward to rest upon the shoulders of a gang of straining, half-naked men. Two others were busy pulling logs from behind the back of the stone and running to position them just ahead of its inching progress. A few more were at the rear of the procession pushing the block forward and it was here that Guth Bandar found himself. They all wore long kilts of linen and not much else, although some had sandals and a few wore skull caps. Bandar looked down at himself and found that he was similarly attired.

But the hands and arms he saw, the pot belly and spindly shanks leading to splayed flat feet, were not those of Guth Bandar. It was an unheard of circumstance. A noönaut entered the Commons in his own virtual image. But Bandar here was clearly not Bandar in appearance. Somehow he had been thrust into the "flesh" of an idiomat. It was but the latest impossibility that Bandar had had to swallow, but it was the one that worried him most.

"Push!" said the voice that had accompanied the whip. The noönaut

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hastened to place his palms against the sandstone and shove before the braided leather could revisit the welt made by its previous landings and bring about an as yet hypothetical but entirely likely third degree of agony whose existence Bandar did not wish to confirm. The stone was cool against his sweating palms and the effort needed to move it across the rollers — aided by all the other straining muscles in the work gang — was not as taxing as he would have expected. Indeed, the men pulling and repositioning the rollers seemed to be working harder than the haulers.

The labor required no mental effort, however, other than to remember to step over the rearmost log as it was pulled from beneath the block. Bandar was thus able to give his full attention to his predicament. The more he considered it, the worse it became. The amount of activity around him, the scope and scale of the site, told him that this was not just a Landscape, nor was it a mere Situation: this was an Event, and a Class One Event at that.

THE SCHOLARS of the Institute categorized the myriad Locations of the noösphere into three types. The simplest were Landscapes, which were recollections of the archetypal settings against which the long story of human existence had been carried out. They ranged from the painted caves that sheltered humankind's infancy through jungle and farmed plain to cityscapes of all ages, including the most decadent of Old Earth's penultimate age.

More complex were the Situations, which preserved all the recurrent circumstances and rites of passage that were the landmarks of human life, from birth through the first kiss, to the meeting of soulmates and on to the gathering of kin around the deathbed. Situations also covered all the darker milestones to be encountered between cradle and grave: the stillborn child, the lover's betrayal, the breaking of friendship's bonds and the lonely death in the wilderness.

Most detailed of all were the Events, the turning points great and small on which history had pivoted: from the fire-hunt that chased mammoths over cliffs to the first planting of crops, through the founding and sack of cities, to the taming of frontiers and the building of topless towers.

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Landscapes were classified according to their size, from a back street to a trackless ocean. All of them recycled quickly. Situations were ranked according to their complexity: some might involve no more than one person's hand enfolding another's; others might require a cast of thousands. But the duration of most Situations was brief, from a moment to at most a few hours, then the elements reformed and the process began anew.

Events, however, might range in duration from under a minute (for a Class Six occurrence like a sprinters' foot race), to a span of many years, even of more than a lifetime, as in such Class One Events as The Opening of the Territory or The Invasion of the Barbarians.

As Bandar shoved against the block of stone and gazed about him at the scores of other work gangs playing their parts, he became more and more fearful that he was trapped in a Location that might endure for as long as a slave — for surely that was what he was in this place — could expect to live.

Unable to speak, he could not sing the tones that would hide him from the perceptions of the idiomatic entities around him. Nor could he activate an exit node and escape back to the waking world. Until his voice returned — and he refused to believe it would not — he was stuck in what was obviously an early version of a Class One Event: The Building of the Grand Monument.

Bandar continued to push, the cycle of the rollers continued, and time wore on as he looked about him and waited for his throat to heal. He was hoping that the cause of his muteness was induced hysterical paralysis, which might fade with time, rather than a magic spell. In the Commons, magic worked effectively and permanently. He grunted and achieved a chesty sound. But when he sought to generate different tones he could not convince himself that he was meeting with success.

His efforts attracted the attention of the idiomat next to him, a heavy-featured man whose back and chest were slabs of muscle and whose arms were corded with hard flesh. The entity turned his small, close-set eyes on Bandar and regarded him without favor, then said, "Shut up, dummy," and laughed at his own wit. In case there was any doubt that the injunction should not be interpreted as friendly banter from an amiable workmate,

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he accompanied it with a slap of his plate-sized hand that left Bandar's virtual head ringing.

Bandar subsided. He would wait until he was alone to try again. He had only to manage the seven tones and his consciousness would be freed from this imprisoning false flesh. He would wake at home in his bed.

The passage of the sun told him that he had arrived in the Event at about mid-morning. By the time the men's shadows were pooled about their feet, they had brought the block more than halfway to its destination. At that point, a two-wheeled cart caught up with them, pulled by a leather-skinned old man wearing only a kind of diaper. The overseer with the whip, a skinny fellow with a squint in one eye, called a halt. The slaves immediately stopped their labors and began what looked to Bandar to be a practiced routine: some pulled from the cart a few poles and a wide bolt of cloth and quickly created an awning whose back wall was the stone block. Others extracted baskets of round, flat loaves and terra-cotta jars that sloshed with liquid confined by wooden stoppers. The men gathered to sit in the shade of the cloth while the food and drink was passed around.

Bandar lowered his buttocks to the hot sand and accepted a chunk torn from a loaf and a wooden cup from the man next to him, a young-looking idiomat who offered him a shy smile and a friendly word. The old man in the loincloth stooped to pour from one of the jars and Bandar smelled the yeasty odor of beer. He drank half a cupful in one gulp, finding it sour but refreshing, then bit off a mouthful of bread and chewed. It was tough though flavorful, despite occasional iotas of grit that scored the enamel of his teeth.

He swallowed and regarded the idiomats with circumspect glances, sorting them into types. Travelers in the noösphere had to remember that its inhabitants were only facsimiles of human persons. Principals of Class One Events and Situations might be somewhat internally varied and nuanced. One such had been the satanic adversary from whom Bandar had received the permanent gift of memory that enabled him to reify the map of the Commons as a color-coded globe. But none approached the complexity of even the simplest human being. The average idiomatic entity was no more than a bundle of basic motivations and responses, enough for it to play its role in the Location's action. It most resembled a character out of fiction.

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So the youth with the shy smile was almost certainly a variant of Doomed Innocence. The big man who had slapped Bandar, and who now hulked with two Henchmen where the awning's shade was deepest, was a classic Bully — and perhaps a lethal one if provoked. The noönaut glanced about and saw other instantly recognizable types: a blank Despair mechanically chewing his crust, a self-possessed Loner off to one side, a bluff Salt-of-the-Earth with chin up and eyes clear, and now here came a smarmy Toady to bring the Bully a refill of beer. The squinting overseer appeared to be a variation on the universal Functionary, specifically an Unambitious version, which was a relief to Bandar, who might have found himself under the rein of a Sadist or Martinet. There was no Hero or Unrecognized King in the mix, so Bandar came to the preliminary conclusion that this gang was no more than a background element in whatever main stories were woven through the Event.

That was a small mercy, since it meant he was unlikely to find himself as a Spear Carrier in a revolt with a life expectancy of hours at best. He would probably have enough time to work out a means of extracting himself from this Location, although time was an enemy as well as a friend: eventually, he would become absorbed into the Event, his consciousness abraded away until only some rudimentary functions remained. His real body would lapse into a coma and dwindle to lifelessness while what was left of Bandar repetitively pushed a stone block across a desert, until the extinction of the human species.

One of the fastest routes to absorption was to interact with the elements of the Location. Bandar had to eat and drink and breathe the hot dry air — here his virtual flesh had all the needs and limitations of his real body lying asleep in his room at the Institute — but forming relationships with idiomats was the greatest danger. So when the Doomed Innocence asked if he was all right, Bandar turned his shoulder and stared into the heat haze that filled the middle distance. The idiomat turned away and was drawn into a conversation among the other men concerning appropriate tactics in some form of team sport.

After they ate, the gang was allowed a siesta. Bandar copied the others, scooping out holes for hip and shoulder then reposing himself on the sand, but though he closed his eyes, his mind remained active while stereotypical snores erupted around him. He sorted through his options: the

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restriction of his voice might wear off, but that was nothing to count on; he might find a magician who was willing to help; he might somehow train an idiomat to sound the seven-note emergency thran for him, though how he might do that while mute was hard to imagine, and besides, it would require encouraging an idiomat to act contrary to its nature — the technical term for such behavior was *disharmony* — which could lead to sudden and even contagious violence; or, best of all, he could find or make a musical instrument that could be tuned to produce the right tones in the right sequence for the right duration.

There was nothing within eyeshot that offered any promise. Bandar would have to wait until they moved to a richer environment: the encampment wherever this crew overnighted. With that issue settled, he turned his mind to the question of what had brought him here. It was not a happy series of thoughts. The collective unconscious was apparently, paradoxically, conscious. It was aware of itself. Worse, it had an agenda; a will of its own. Worse yet, it had no qualms about interfering with the consciousness of an individual — or even several; Bandar now realized that the harsh reception he had received at the Grand Colloquium might well have been stimulated by the Commons. Worst of all, the individual consciousness that had been selected for the most aggravated interference was Guth Bandar's.

He could content himself with one realization, however: he had not been dumped into this specific Location by random chance. Nor had he been sent here to be eliminated; there were many Locations in the Commons where life expectancy was to be measured in seconds. Instead of being popped into a lightless steerage cabin far below the deck of a sinking ocean liner or into the path of a superheated pyroclastic cloud rushing down the slope of an erupting volcano at almost the speed of sound, he had been eased into a slowly evolving Event.

Bandar knew enough about the noösphere to be certain that the self-aware Commons had placed him here so that he could receive the collective unconscious's most routine product, that which was dispensed through myth, fable, joke, and every other kind of story from classic literature to popular entertainment: a lesson.

He couldn't learn his lesson if he were dead, and it would do him no good if he was to be absorbed into this Event. So the wisest course was to

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go along with the Commons's scheme, until he could contrive an escape.

Bandar lay awake and mulled. The obvious lesson to be drawn from being enslaved and forced to push massive blocks under punishing sun and lash was obedience. Although, he reminded himself, the noösphere was not always obvious. Sometimes it delivered its messages through side doors or by the sudden emergence from the background of some overlooked but telling detail. He resolved to remain vigilant.

After what seemed a long while, the overseer crawled out of the shade beneath the cart where he had slept in relative isolation and began kicking feet and poking buttocks with the butt of his whip. The slaves arose, stretching and yawning theatrically, and drained the last of the beer from the jug. Several of them went off behind an outcrop of rust-colored rock to relieve themselves, then straggled back to strike the awning and load it, along with the empty baskets and beer jugs, into the old man's cart.

The cart trundled back toward town while Bandar and the others resumed their labors. As the afternoon wore on, the block inched toward the monument. Bandar scanned the huge structure, trying to determine what its ultimate form and dimensions might be, but it was early in the construction process and all he could know for sure was that the final creation would rest upon a colossal foundation of stone.

As the sun touched the horizon, they delivered the block to a staging area where a man wearing a linen wrap and a headdress chased with colored threads used a stick of charcoal to draw symbols on its upper surface. The stone was apparently no longer the concern of Bandar's gang, because the overseer efficiently chivvied them into a double column and directed them to march back the way they had come. The return journey was remarkably quick after their laborious day-long progress.

Bandar found himself walking in the middle of the formation, Doomed Innocence on his left and the Toady literally on his heels. But he paid no attention to either the former's renewed attempts at conversation nor to the latter's treading on his tendons. His placement in relation to the others would not be coincidence — in the Commons, coincidence was never a random event, but rather a sign that the noösphere's operating system was functioning at optimum efficiency. The less Bandar responded to idiomats' overtures, the more slowly he would be absorbed.

Near the end of their march they passed a substantial encampment of

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linen tents set in neatly ordered rows around a playing field where idiomat soldiers drilled in formation with spear and shield or sparred in pairs with wooden swords and war hatchets. The slave quarters lay on the edge of town, an unwalled cluster of large huts made in plaited reeds and thatched with matted straw. Cooking fires burned in mud brick ovens, tended by typical female idiomats: a few Crones, some Maidens (both the Demure and Saucy variants) and at least a couple of Sturdy Matrons, all dressed in lengths of coarse cloth wound about their bodies and pinned at the shoulder. They were stirring communal pots full of the evening meal, a bubbling concoction of generic grains and meat scraps with a pungent odor.

Bandar found that the food was eaten communally as well, with everyone seated on woven reed mats surrounding a bonfire in the open space at the center of the slave quarters. First he must get in line and take a shallow wooden plate from a stack on a table. Then he shuffled along to where a Demure Maiden ladled out a thick concoction of grain, vegetables, and chunks of gray meat. Bandar saw a complex exchange of looks between the Maiden and Doomed Innocence and wondered if this was the situation in which he was supposed to involve himself. He did not meet the young female idiomat's gaze as she ladled out his share. He looked about for utensils but saw none; then he noted that the man in front of him took some thin flat bread from a stack on a nearby table where he also collected a cup of the weak beer.

Bandar did likewise, then followed the fellow over to some empty spots on the mats, several feet from where Doomed Innocence was clearly saving a space for his friend the mute. Bandar paid no heed to the increasingly puzzled idiomat's attempts to attract his attention. Instead he watched as the man beside him put the bowl before him on the ground and tore off a swatch of bread half the size of his palm; then, holding the scrap between thumb and fingers, he used it to pinch up a mouthful of the bowl's contents. Bandar copied the action and was rewarded with a taste so spicy that he reached at once for the beer.

The heat of the day faded rapidly as full dark came on. Bandar shivered and wondered where he was to spend the night. Probably one of the big huts, with everyone squeezed together for warmth. Though not quite everyone, he decided, as the squinting overseer led the Maiden who had

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served Bandar his food toward a smaller hut at the edge of the open space, while Doomed Innocence regarded them glumly.

Bandar knew that the archetypal Mute usually manifested in one of two main sub-archetypes: Sinister or Sympathetic. He seemed to be of the latter species. He had no idea how the collective unconscious had contrived to replace an existing figure; it would be well worth a paper for the Institute, if he survived to write it, and if the scholars would ever deign to listen to him again, now that their minds had been subtly poisoned against him from within.

He was not yet sure what his role was supposed to be, but his speculations became moot when a steaming dab of pottage unexpectedly struck Bandar's bare chest, the stuff hot enough to sting. He brushed it away with the backs of his fingers, then looked up to see the Toady sneering at him from the other side of the communal fire, a short lath of wood cocked in his hands, ready to flick a second scalding missile Bandar's way. Behind him, the Bully and the Henchmen stood laughing.

Bandar reacted without thinking, a flash of anger causing him to hurl his empty beer cup at his tormentor so that it struck the man square in the forehead. The Toady fell back, howling, his feet kicking in the air. A general laugh went up from the crowd but quickly subsided when the Bully leapt to his feet, glared at Bandar and pointed a thick, calloused finger. "You!" he said.

Bandar had regretted the flinging of the cup even as it left his hand. In the Commons, it was best to act only upon conscious reflection. An automatic response could be a sign that the Location's rules of procedure had begun to seep into the noönaut's virtual being, a precursor to absorption. Now he had scarcely the span of two breaths to reflect on how to respond to the Bully, because the big idiomat and his thugs were coming around the bonfire and the expression on their faces left no doubt as to what they intended to do.

Bandar knew a number of techniques for self defense — it was a necessary skill for anyone venturing into the noösphere. But a Sympathetic Mute would not stand and fight a Bully and his gang. For him to do so could introduce a sharply disharmonious element to the Location, triggering potentially dangerous chaos. Serious disruptions could even cause an Event to reinitiate itself prematurely; if that were to happen,

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Bandar's consciousness would not survive the change-over. He thought these things as he sprang to his feet and ran into the darkness, the bellowing idiomats pounding after him.

No walls confined the slaves. Once out of town, they had nowhere to go but the desert and the river that probably teemed with crocodiles. Bandar took his chances with the town. It was laid out haphazardly, and first he ran through narrow streets curling among huts and rough corrals that penned baa-ing goats and sheep. Then he came into broader streets, though still paved only with dirt, of more substantial habitations, mud brick with wooden shutters over glassless windows; some were even walled compounds with gates of squared timbers. All of these details Bandar acquired on the run, finding his way by the light of a half moon, augmented by occasional oil lamps flickering in windows or by burning torches affixed over gates.

The Bully and his gang stayed with him through every twist and turning. The big idiomat was probably too simple to do other than follow his nature, Bandar thought, and too strong to tire easily. The noönaut did not look back but he could hear his pursuers' heavy footfalls and panting breaths coming ever nearer. The Mute was not built for a long chase.

He was racing down a wider street than most, the way lined with walls and stout fences. Here might be Officials in whose presence the Bully would have to prostrate himself and forego his violent intentions. Bandar saw an open gate flanked by burning brands, a lit courtyard beyond. He took the risk of slowing, felt the angry idiomat's fingers graze his shoulder as he turned and dodged through the gate.

He had hoped to find a person of rank at ease in his yard, perhaps with guards or stout servants who would cow the bully. Instead, Bandar pulled up short in the dust-floored open space, seeing only a moderately ample mud brick house with an open front. Here, under a thatched awning, an idiomat man and boy were doing something the noönaut did not have time to identify, because the pursuing Bully immediately struck him from behind and knocked him sprawling.

Bandar tumbled to the ground and tried to roll away, but a foot caught him under the ribs and the pain and impact drove the air out of his virtual lungs. The Bully and his gang stood over him, mouthing imprecations

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Bandar couldn't quite catch over the roaring in his ears, then a second kick grazed his head and the night erupted in colored lights.

He hugged his head between his forearms and curled up, waiting for the next strike. But it didn't come. He heard another voice, then the sound of flesh smacking flesh followed by grunts and a moan. Bandar inched apart his arms just far enough to peek out.

He saw the Bully getting to his hands and knees, blood pouring from a nose that had acquired a new angle. A brawny man wearing a scarred leather kilt was bringing one sandaled foot to connect with a Henchman's buttocks, causing him to stumble quickly through the gate and into the street. The other thug, along with the Toady, stood beyond the gateway wearing looks of wide-eyed consternation.

In a few seconds the yard was cleared, Bandar's former pursuers issuing dire threats but putting distance between themselves and the brawny idiomat who laughed as he slammed the gate shut, then turned to regard Bandar. "What did you do to set that lumbering mutton thumper after you?" he said.

Bandar got to his knees and strove to reorder his breathing. He indicated to his rescuer that he had no voice, and saw the man nod. The idiomat approached and put a thickly calloused hand under Bandar's arm, lifting him to his feet as if he weighed no more than the skinny youth who was watching them from the open space before the house.

Bandar recognized the setting: the front of the house was an open-air smithy — with anvil, forge, hammers and tongs, tub of water — and the older idiomat was a Smith while the younger was clearly a version of the Shiftless Apprentice. The noönaut now experienced a shiver of alarm as he noted that the Smith was a more than averagely realized idiomat. His intervention to save Bandar argued that he was at least partially formed of Hero-stuff, and therefore potentially a more significant figure in this Event, perhaps even one of its Principals or Subprincipals.

I should get away from here, he thought as he bowed and gestured to disavow any need for the Smith's further care and solicitude. The pain in his abdomen was fading.

"If you say so," said the idiomat, returning to the anvil where he had been working before Bandar erupted into his yard, "but your friends might be waiting for you down the street. They didn't seem the kind to forgive and forget."

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Bandar shrugged. Interaction with a Principal would accelerate his absorption. He needed to put distance between himself and this element of the Location. He bowed again, managed a grateful smile, and turned toward the gate.

"Good luck," he heard the Smith say. Then he heard something else: a *clink* of metal on metal, a *clink* that was precisely the tone of the second note in the seven-note emergency escape thran. Bandar turned back.

THE WORK WAS not hard. Bandar took the place of the lazy idiomat boy who operated the bellows. This was a sewn-up goat skin with two wooden handles that Bandar pulled aside and pushed together, filling and emptying the trapped air which rushed through the skin's neck to feed the glowing charcoal in the forge.

The overseer had come in the morning, Bully and Toady eager in his wake, to demand the runaway's return. The Smith had stood up to him, speaking in tones of genial reason.

"The Subgovernor constantly demands that the work proceed more quickly. He needs more tools, sharper tools. I need strong arms at the bellows. Why don't we go and ask His Excellency?"

Bandar saw alarm flicker in the Functionary's eyes. "We need not trouble the Subgovernor," the idiomat said.

"Then it is settled."

"My tally will be short."

The Smith gestured to the boy. "Take back this boy you gave me the last time I said I needed help. He's better at running errands than squatting at the bellows. Let him bring your cup and carry messages."

Faced with a combination of unyielding will and an avenue of lateral evasion, the overseer acceded. The boy went, Bandar stayed, and the Bully left with thunder in his face, cuffing the Toady out of his way at the gate.

Bandar easily settled into the rhythm of the Smith's days. In the early morning and evening he attended at the forge. When the heat grew oppressive, they worked in the relative cool of the mud brick house, sharpening iron chisels and wedges with file and whetstone and shaping the molds of damp sand in which bronze and copper castings were made.

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The Smith seemed pleased with his efforts and they worked well together. For his part, Bandar felt comfortable in the role of helper. At least he was not involved in the inevitable strife that would pit Doomed Innocence's infatuation against the overseer's appetites. Nothing hastened a noönaut's absorption into a Location faster than joining in a conflict.

At midday, along with the rest of the town, they took their siesta, Bandar curling up on a rough mattress of coarse cloth stuffed with grass against the back wall of the smithy. He had never slept in the Commons before; sensible noönauts rarely stayed long enough to feel the need and when they did, they sang open a gate and left. He noted that he experienced no dreams, though this made sense to him when he thought about it: a conscious unconscious was enough of a contradiction in terms; the dreams of dreams were not to be thought of.

Every other day, in the evening, a wagon arrived, driven by an overseer, drawn by a donkey and surrounded by a squad of guards armed with sword, spear, and shield. When the entourage halted in the smithy's yard the gates were closed and the guards took up positions to secure the area. Bandar came out with the Smith and together they took from the overseer — this one the type classified as Exacting Functionary — three baskets of iron and bronze tools to be sharpened or repaired. They carried them into the smithy where, under the watchful eye of the overseer and the captain of the guards, each item was counted out and checked against a tally.

When the procedure was completed, the Smith brought out a second load of tools that had been refurbished over the preceding two days. Again, each tool was meticulously checked against a list written in charcoal on a roll of papyrus. When every piece had been accounted for, the wagon was loaded and reversed, and the guards alertly checked the street before allowing it to roll through the gate.

Once the days had settled into a routine, Bandar took action to change his situation. While the rest of the household napped in the heat of the day, he rose from his straw tick and went to the forge. To anyone who might chance to observe him, he was a smith's helper arranging tools and materials in better order on the workbench. But his true purpose was to strike each metal object with a small scrap of iron, listening to the note that rang in response.

The medium sized tongs were what had made the note he had first

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heard, the second in the series of seven. A strip of iron banding, used to strengthen tubs and barrels, sounded with the frequency of the fourth note. That left five to be discovered. Bandar worked his way along the bench, found a punch that rang with the tone of the third.

He allowed himself a moment of happy anticipation. He had worked out the situation. The Multifacet had sent him here for some purpose. He was sure it had to do with Doomed Innocence, since he had been plunked down in the virtual body of a Sympathetic Mute who would have been the youthful idiomat's natural companion in the work gang. Bandar was supposed to learn a lesson of altruism, perhaps even of self-sacrifice, which would suit him for whatever task the Commons wished him to perform in the far-off future.

But the noönaut had been too canny. He had broken out of the context in which he had been placed, found a new setting in which all that was required of him were his functioning arms. And now he was putting together the means to open a gate and leave this Location. After that, he would never again come unawares into the Commons; he knew techniques that would keep him safe once he was free of the stricture at his throat. The noösphere would have to find another patsy.

He turned his attention to some hoe blades heaped in the corner and after a few tries found one that rang with the frequency of note seven. *Three to go,* he thought; then he noticed a wooden plank beneath the hoes, set flush with the dirt floor and so discolored by ash and soot that it blended in with the packed earth around it.

Curious, Bandar brushed aside the farmers' tools and examined the wood. It seemed to be a small trap door. He used the edge of a hoe to pry it up and peered within, finding a layer of sacking. This he pulled up, disturbing what was underneath. He heard a *clonk* that, to his pitch-perfect noönaut's ear, was the exact sound of note number one in the seven-tone thran. *Another down and only two to go,* he thought and reached into the hole.

His fingers closed around cold iron and he brought up what he had found. It was a broad-bladed spear point, needle sharp at the tip and razor edged down both sides. He tapped it with the little bar of iron and it rang true. He set it down and reached deeper into the darkness, careful of cutting himself, and found more spear heads, then a long bundle wrapped

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in sackcloth that contained three rudimentary short swords. He struck one with his rod but the sound it produced was off-key and useless.

A horn-skinned hand closed about the back of Bandar's neck and he was pulled up and to his feet, then still higher so that his toes barely brushed the ground. He felt himself rotated until his eyes met those of an angry idiomat. The Smith shook the noönaut so that his virtual bones rattled within him.

"What are you doing?" was the Smith's first question. The second was, "Who sent you?"

Bandar opened his mouth, but no sound emerged. He tried to convey by facial expression alone that he was innocent of any ill intent, but he knew that his grimace of pain kept creeping in to overshadow the message. With a grunt of disgust, the Smith flung him toward a corner and Bandar landed hard on his back and one elbow. The pain felt very real.

He struggled to rise. He saw another face peeking into the smithy from the yard: the old man in a loincloth who had brought lunch to the work gang. But Bandar's attention was soon reclaimed by the Smith. The big idiomat had gone to the forge and was now turned toward him. In his hand was a heavy maul and behind the anger in his honest face was an underlying expression of reluctant determination.

The little iron rod Bandar had used to test for tones had rolled free. He reached for it and struggled to his knees. If he had read the situation correctly, his appealingness as a Sympathetic Mute, coupled with the Smith's beneficent nature, could deliver him from the latter's anger — provided Bandar performed the right action. He stood up and went to the workbench where he struck the tongs, then the punch, ringing two pure notes from the metal. He struck the strengthening band, then from the three he played a simple tune.

The Smith now regarded him with a mixed countenance. Bandar tried for his most appealing expression as he crossed to the hoe blades and spear points and brought one of each back to the bench. He arranged them in a simple scale then played another tune for the idiomat, wishing as he did so that he had all seven tones needed to open a gate. But the song and the innocence of Bandar's borrowed face were having the desired effect.

"You just wanted to make music," the Smith said.

Bandar enthusiastically signaled an affirmative and the idiomat put

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down the maul, his face showing almost as much relief as Bandar felt. The old man came into the smithy and said, "We should have known. He's too simple to be a spy for the Subgovernor. Come, let's get these things stowed before somebody sees them as shouldn't."

The noönaut enthusiastically helped transfer the weapons to baskets and hide them in the cart, and when the Smith unthinkingly counseled him to say nothing, he tapped his lips and smiled. They all laughed together, the Smith with a hearty boom and Bandar in heartfelt mime. The idiomats left him there and went into the house, doubtless to conspire further, Bandar thought. For his part, the noönaut assiduously fell to seeking the other two notes of the escape thran. He found tone number six in a copper ladle used to drip water on cooling metal, but the fifth and last note remained elusive.

Bandar struck his way about the forge with an energy that was increasingly desperate. This Location was not what he had thought it was: the Event was not a variant of The Building of the Grand Monument; it was an iteration of another great trope of the Commons — The Rising of the Oppressed. But, once again, Bandar's situation had started bad and become worse: the idiomat to whom he had attached himself was a Principal of this bloody Event. Worst of all, although Bandar was not particularly well versed in Revolts, he was enough of an Institute scholar to know that they almost always culminated in a massacre of the rebels.

The clandestine weapon-making was a sophisticated operation. Every piece of iron that entered the smithy was accounted for, from the raw ingots sent down from the City under guard by troops of the Governor's own household to the tools and implements distributed and collected each day by the Subgovernor's men at the slave camp. Even the pots and pans in which the communal meals were prepared were kept under guard.

But midway along the route between the Monument and the town someone with a knowledgeable eye had noted an outcrop of iron ore. The area soon became a place where slaves would relieve themselves, an activity they were allowed to do without being closely watched, the guards being almost as likely to go unsandaled as most of the workers. Unobserved, the slaves would break off handfuls of the friable rock and deposit it in the baskets from which the old man distributed bread at

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lunchtime, and which found their way to the smithy where the Smith would smelt the ore into iron and fashion weapons from it.

The old man who brought the ore also took away the weapons, carrying them back to the communal huts where the women hid them in the thatch and beneath the dirt floors. Bandar deduced that the arming of the slaves had been going on for quite some time and, judging by the ancient courier's excitement, the Rising was imminent.

It was an inspired plan. Not for the first time in his career as an aficionado of the kaleidoscope of human experiences exemplified in the Commons, Bandar marveled at the ingenuity with which the simple contrived to counter oppression by the mighty. But he also knew that a talent for brilliant improvisation was rarely a match for phalanxes of trained and well-led soldiery. He definitely needed to find the missing fifth note and complete the thran.

Still, nothing rang with the right frequency, although the noönaut *tink*ed and *tonk*ed on every possible object in the smithy and the attached household. His ability to search during his spare time grew limited, however, because the Smith required him to assemble various metallic items on the workbench and to reproduce tunes that the idiomat liked to hum while working at the forge.

It would not have been an intolerable existence but for the imminent threat of annihilation. Even so, Bandar found himself slipping into the routine of the days, taking pleasure in small things. The Smith was an agreeable sort, almost always of a pleasant disposition, being an idiomat idealist who lacked the full array of subtler sensibilities that would complexify the personality of even the most simple real human being. Bandar kept finding in himself an urge to be of help to the fellow, even to the point of wondering if there was some way he could prevent the cycle of the Event from fulfilling itself, which must surely end with the Smith heroically dead.

He resisted the urge, which was not ultimately put to the test. No options presented themselves for altering the inevitable flow of the Event toward its sad conclusion, and Bandar was resolved not to try to create one. If he were truly a misplaced idiomat — although he would have to be an Iconoclastic Genius rather than merely a Sympathetic Mute — Bandar might fortuitously discover an elementary explosive or craft a primitive

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aircraft that would give the slaves some advantage over the authorities.

But he was quite sure this was not an archetypal rendition of the Traveler Displaced in Time. So the moment he introduced disharmonious material, the Location would begin to accumulate stress on an exponential scale. Bandar had already been inside a Class Four Situation while it was coming apart because of his inadvertent interference; what it might be like to experience the dissolution of a Class One Event did not bear thinking of.

So he continued his search for the fifth note. It had the highest frequency of the seven, more than a full octave above the lowest. Bandar was starting to think that no object of iron, bronze, or copper that he was likely to find around the smithy would produce it. A plate of very thin iron might do. He wondered if he could convince the idiomat to fashion a xylophone. But between his open and surreptitious labors the Smith was already so occupied that the likelihood was scant, even if Bandar could somehow communicate the idea.

Then one evening, as he helped the Smith fashion a mold in which to cast a set of bronze weights, Bandar heard the elusive note. It came from beyond the outer wall, from the cross street that the Smith had told him ran to where the Subgovernor's mansion sat on a slight rise overlooking town and river.

Bandar rose and took up the jug that held the water they used to dampen the sand of the mold. He went toward the well at one side of the yard, but instead of stopping continued on to the gate and looked out in time to see the source of the sound: four slaves were carrying a curtained litter, escorted by a squad of spearmen. Ahead of them all stepped an idiomat whose attire and bearing identified him as a variant of Pomposity in Office — a majordomo of some sort — and who carried a staff that curled into a loop at one end. Hung within the loop, gleaming in the day's dwindling light, was a small silver bell. As the party approached the next intersection, the servant shook the staff so that the bell sounded again — it was indeed precisely the right note — and every other idiomat on the street stopped, turned toward the litter and bowed.

The Smith had come to see what had caught his helper's attention. "The Subgovernor's First Wife," he said, following it with an eloquent twist of his mouth. "Come, we must finish."

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Bandar went back to their work, but as he crossed the yard he heard again, fading into the distance, the sound that could offer him deliverance.

THE CALENDAR was built around the phases of the moon, with observances performed at its maximum wax and wane. Twice each month of twenty-eight days, all work ceased and all the town, high and low, slave and free, gathered at the white stone temple at the river's edge. Priests clad in fine robes hemmed and cuffed with metallic thread carried a great disc of beaten silver down to the water, where they ritually bathed the pale orb, then bore it in a mass procession back up the broad stairs to the sanctuary. At the culmination of the ceremony, the high priest would bless the assembly; then all would return to their dwellings for a celebratory meal, a siesta, and, in the late afternoon, rowdy team sports and dancing.

The rising was set for the moment of the benediction. The shuffling throng on the steps was always a heterogeneous mingling of slaves, townsfolk, and soldiers. Traditionally, when the hierophant spoke the concluding words of the rite — "It is done. Go now." — the mix would separate into its component streams, with the slaves walking back to their compound under loose guard, everyone glad of the feast and leisure to come.

The Subgovernor and his family sat on a platform to one side at the top of the steps, attended by their senior servants and a squad of bodyguards. Behind them, a broad ramp descended to a paved road that led up the rise to the mansion. They were no more than a few paces from the front of the throng on the upper steps, and today that portion of the crowd was unusually thick with strong male slaves.

The underpriests carried the moon disk into the temple. There came an expectant pause then the high priest spoke the ritual words. As usual, the crowd sighed and a hubbub of murmurs broke out as people turned and began to descend the steps. Then the day became unusual.

Instead of turning and leaving, some thirty slaves at the fore of the crowd stood still, so that the intermixed townsfolk and soldiers drew away from them. From beneath their long kilts some of the men brought out short swords. Others produced lengths of turned wood to which they quickly fitted broad-bladed spear points. As one, and without a word, they charged the Subgovernor's party.

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The guards, lulled by the familiarity of routine, had already turned away. The rapid scuffle of feet on stone alerted them, however, and they swung back, attempting to establish a line, shields locked and spears coming down to form a bristle of points.

But the slaves had practiced their tactics too many times on the trampled ground where they were allowed to play muscular games with a ball of cloth wrapped in horsehide. They hit the guards before the line could form, and once broken, the guards were no match for thrice their numbers. While the priests and townsfolk looked on in horror, the slaves slaughtered the bodyguards and seized the Subgovernor and his entourage at spear point.

The townspeople scattered to their homes amid cries of horror. The soldiers shouldered their way free of the mob of fleeing civilians and, under the barked orders of their officers, assembled halfway up the steps, forming two lines angled toward the rebels on the platform above. They set their spears and shields and waited for the order to advance.

Bandar had watched all of this from near the bottom of the steps where, in the company of the Smith, he had stood through the ceremony. Now, as the townsfolk fled, he saw the great mass of slaves, men as well as women, stand gaping in horror and consternation at the armed confrontation until a double squad of soldiers were directed by their commander to surround them and march them back to camp.

With kicks and blows from their spear butts, the soldiers rapidly shaped the hundreds of slaves into a column and began to march them away. But they had gone no more than a few paces before a great shout and clashing of weapons came from the top of the steps. Many of the soldiers marching with the column could not resist turning to look toward the source of the racket. They saw the rebels around the Subgovernor bellowing and smashing their iron weapons together, and that was the last thing they saw because their momentary distraction was the signal for scores of those they guarded to draw concealed knives and stab them.

"Now!" cried the Smith, and pulled from beneath his kilt the heavy maul with which he had once threatened Bandar. He threw himself against a maniple of soldiers who had had the presence of mind to close together and were spearing the knife-wielding rebels from behind their shields. The Smith attacked from their rear, crushing skulls and spines

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with his great hammer, and in seconds the guards were dead, their corpses plundered for their weapons.

"Make a line!" the Smith shouted. "Those without arms pry up the paving stones!"

A few of the slaves hung back, frightened and uncertain. But Bandar saw even Crones and Maidens digging their fingers into the cracks between the flags, upending them, then lifting the squares to dash them down. The impact shattered the stones and hard, eager hands reached for the jagged fragments.

The Smith's voice boomed out — "All right, at them!" — and the slaves charged up the steps toward the double line of soldiers, even as the officers were frantically screaming at the rear rank to about-face. A hail of sharp-edged stones came arcing over the heads of the upsurging armed rebels and the soldiers who had reversed to meet them threw up their shields to ward off the barrage. But these soldiers were not the stones' intended targets. Instead the jagged chunks of rock flew over their upraised shields to smash into the unprotected skulls and spines of the spearmen still facing the thirty who had seized the Subgovernor.

As men fell moaning or unconscious out of the upper rank, leaving gaps and causing those not hit to glance worriedly over their shoulders, the majority of the thirty rebels above left the Subgovernor and his entourage in the custody of a few men with swords. Screaming just as they had practiced so many times on the ball field, they formed a bristling wedge and threw themselves at the wavering line of soldiers at the same moment as their friends from below struck the lower rank of spearmen.

It was a brutal business. Though Bandar had seen it in other Locations, with men who wore different garments and wielded more sophisticated weapons, it was always the same. Metal pierced flesh, blood spattered from slashing wounds or fountained from severed arteries, to a chorus of high pitched screams and bestial grunts. He watched with an expert eye and decided that this might well be one of those Risings of the Oppressed in which a gifted Hero — for so the Smith undoubtedly was — carried the day. But then he saw Doomed Innocence roaring in the front rank of the rebels, stabbing with his spear, his Demure Maiden at his side wielding a long knife with the skill of a butcher. And Bandar remembered

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that even the successful revolts usually lasted no longer than it took for fresh troops to arrive in overwhelming numbers.

He skirted around the edge of the melee, careful to maintain a safe distance. He kept experiencing an urge to go toward the Smith, to help him in some indefinable way. Suddenly it all became clear. *I am becoming embedded in the Mute's dynamic. He is a Hero's Helper. That is the role that the Commons wants to press me into.*

But Bandar resisted the pull. He had to avoid danger, because if he died in this Location, his consciousness would be irrevocably meshed with its elements. He would be the Mute forever, unless the Commons had a means of extracting him at the point of death, a possibility in which he was not willing to trust his existence. Besides, Bandar was still Bandar, and he had his own agenda, the crowning piece of which awaited him at the top of the steps.

The slaves had surrounded the remaining soldiers, pressing them into a tight cluster, jammed so closely together that most of them could not bring their weapons to bear. More chunks of masonry were now flying from all sides, smashing into the trapped remnant. Wherever an impact rocked a spearman, a rebel was waiting to slip sharp iron through the gap. The action would not last much longer. Bandar dodged around the rear of the fighters and climbed toward the Subgovernor's party.

He put on his most appealing face, smiling and gesturing happily to the men who held the dignitaries, clapping them on their shoulders as he slipped among them. At the rear of the group the First Wife's majordomo stood ashen-faced, his brow glistening with a chill sweat, the hooked staff of office quivering in his grasp so that its little silver bell tinkled too softly to be heard over the sounds of murder.

Bandar stepped up to the terrified idiomat, put the thumb and finger of one hand to the ringing metal, then brought up a knife in the other. The majordomo flinched, but Bandar offered him a harmless smile and sliced through the thread that held the bell. Then he turned and sped across the top of the temple steps, seeing from the corner of his vision the priests clustered within its entry, all white of eye and open-mouthed.

In a few moments the noönaut was down the steps, past the heaped corpses of the column guards, and into the empty streets of the town. With the fifth note clasped in his hand, he made his way at a fast trot past closed

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gates and shuttered windows, to arrive at the smithy hardly out of breath.

He set the silver bell on workbench then began assembling his seven-toned instrument around it, reaching for the tongs and the other pieces then bringing from under his kilt the spear point he had been issued but had not used. When the seven items were arranged in proper order he allowed himself a brief smile and a small sigh of satisfaction, then he turned to look for the small rod that was his striker.

A dark figure came between him and the bright world outside the smithy. It took him a moment to make out the habitual sneer of the Toady. Then he saw the hulking form of the Bully and the Henchmen. Bandar realized that he could not recall having seen any of them in the fighting. But he saw that they carried weapons, swords of gray iron whose edges gleamed with the brightness of fresh sharpening, still unblooded.

He grasped it all in a moment. The Bully cared nothing for the slaves' cause. Instead he would help suppress it, seeking to be granted the only life such an idiomat could aspire to: as an overseer given a whip and plenty of unnecessary encouragement to use it.

And so he would lurk here until the Smith came home — as he surely would, humble in his moment of triumph. Then, while the victorious slaves celebrated in the streets, the Bully and his gang would wait in the house and treacherously stab the Hero to death. When the night grew quiet, they would steal away, carrying the butchered idiomat's head in a basket, aiming to meet the army that the Governor would soon send downriver to put the town back to rights.

All of that Bandar knew in the time it took him to blink in surprise. It was an old story, of course; that was why it had been preserved forever in the collective memory of humankind. What surprised him was the strength of the desire that now filled him, the powerful urge to run from here at all speed, to find the Hero and warn him. Even as he marveled at the power of the impulse, he saw that one of his hands was reaching back for the spear point while his mind was seeing a picture of the Mute breaking through the four men, slashing as he ran.

Then the whole situation became academic. The Toady was shouldered aside by the Bully. The last Bandar saw was the smirk on the thick lips and the smug satisfaction in the close-set, beer-colored eyes as the big man drove his sword through the noönaut's belly and up into his heart.

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The pain was like ice and fire together, and then it was gone. And so was Bandar.

The thugs, the smithy, the town instantly ceased to be. Bandar was back once more in the luminous mist. The Multifacet regarded him placidly from the eyes of a cartoon lion.

"You have failed," Bandar said.

"Have we?"

"You wanted me to be Helper to the doomed Hero, but I would not."

A tusked demon smiled in return. "Yet you wished to."

"I fought the urge, and prevailed."

The demon became a saucy tomboy. "Because you knew whence it came. What will you do when its source is less obvious?"

Bandar set his jaw. "Be as subtle as you like. I will be on guard."

A kind-eyed saint smiled and said, "Not if you don't remember."

As these last words were spoken, the figure dwindled rapidly, as if it rushed away from Bandar at great speed, pulling the mist twisting and roiling in its wake. The noönaut blinked and found himself reposing in the shade of the palm tree, the generic ocean rippling and whispering up the gently sloping beach and the three gamins beckoning him to pursue them. The blonde gave him her unintentional parody of a come-hither look while the red-haired one cocked one hip.

Bandar smiled and sat up. A shadow of a thought crossed his mind. Hadn't he been thinking of something just now? He reached for the memory, but whatever it had been, it had now ebbed away. He got to his feet and chased the three giggling idiomats out into the waves where, as always, the sequence faded and a new dream took its place.

In the morning, Bandar formally resigned from the Institute of Historical Inquiry and caught the noon jitney to the balloon tram station at Binch. He would return to Olkney and take up a position with his Uncle Fley, who operated a housewares business in which there had long been a standing offer of a junior executive post for Bandar, Fley having no heirs of his own.

It was with a mix of feelings that Bandar watched the ground fall away as the tram car ascended high above the tracks. He saw, far off, the Institute's grounds, the neat cloisters and formal gardens, the grand old

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halls and the students' cottages, and a tear came to his eye. But then he turned his mind resolutely toward the future: Uncle Fley, though only a commerciant, was a man of integrity and quiet accomplishment. He struggled against the vicissitudes of existence with courage and without complaint.

There was a nobility in the simple life, even a kind of heroism, Bandar told himself. He experienced a gentle urge to stand by his uncle, to be of help.

Ode to Multiple Universes

By Terry Pratchett

I DO HAVE worlds enough and time
to spare an hour to find a rhyme
to take a week to pen an article
a day to find a rhyme for "particle."
In many worlds my time is free
to spend ten minutes over tea
and steal the time from some far moon
so words can take all afternoon,
away beyond the speed of light
I'll write a novel in one night.
Aeons beckon, if I want 'em...

...but I can't have 'em, 'cos of Quantum.

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Terry Bisson is the author of such novels as Voyage to the Red Planet, Talking Man, *and* The Pickup Artist. *His latest book,* Greetings & Other Stories, *should be out this month, and* Numbers Don't Lie *is due later this year.*

Among his many talents, Terry Bisson is a master at spinning out skewed short-short stories that fall somewhere between fable and tall tale. "Billy and the Ants" is one such yarn, a story for young readers that's liable to make more experienced readers say, "Leiningen! Fuggedaboutit!"

Billy and the Ants

By Terry Bisson

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL morning.

"Die!" said Billy.

The ants were marching in a long row, up the driveway toward the garage.

"Rat-a-tat-tat!" said Billy, making a machine-gun noise as he slid his shoe along the concrete.

The ants died, ten at a time.

"What are you doing?" Billy's mother asked.

"Playing," said Billy.

There was a drain at the bottom of the driveway.

Billy got his water gun.

"Flash flood!" he said, washing the ants down the drain. They tried to swim but it did them no good.

"Stay out of the street," said Billy's mother.

"Yes, ma'am," said Billy. He knew better than to go into the street.

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"Oh boy," said Billy. These ants were bigger.

"Boom boom boom," he said, making an artillery noise as he hit them with the hammer.

Each ant left a little spot on the concrete.

"Is that your father's good hammer?" asked Billy's mother. "Put it back."

"Where are you going with that steak knife?" asked Billy's mother.

"Playing soldier."

"Well, don't go out of the yard."

"Yes, ma'am." There were lots of ants out back, by the garbage can. They were bigger than the ones in the driveway.

"Fix bayonets!" said Billy.

The ants tried to run.

"Die!" said Billy, as he stabbed them with the steak knife, one by one.

There were even more ants by the garden shed.

"Enemy sighted," said Billy.

The ants were hiding under the grass, but it did them no good. They were almost an inch long, and easy to find.

"Bombs away!" said Billy, making an airplane noise as he dropped the bricks on them.

"Lunch!" said Billy's mother, from the house.

"In a minute," said Billy. He was looking around for more ants to kill.

"Peanut butter and jelly!" said Billy's mother.

Peanut butter and jelly was Billy's favorite.

"Coming!" he said.

"Your father called," said Billy's mother. "He's coming home tomorrow. He's bringing you a present."

"Can I have another sandwich?" asked Billy. He had a lot of ants to kill.

"Of course, darling," said Billy's mother. "And then it's nap time."

Billy hated naps. He lay on his bed, on top of the covers.

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He heard a scratching noise outside.

He got up and looked out the window.

There was a big ant, as big as a rat. It was trying to climb up the side of the house to the window. Its feelers were waving around.

Billy got his bow and arrows out of his toy chest. The arrows had rubber tips. He pulled them off and sharpened the arrows in his pencil sharpener. It was electric.

Then Billy leaned out the window with his bow. The first arrow bounced off the ant, but the next two went all the way through and stuck out the other side.

The ant fell on its back, waving its legs in the air. The arrows looked like extra legs.

Then Billy heard his mother's footsteps. He jumped back into bed and closed his eyes.

His mother opened the door. "Are you asleep?" she whispered.

Billy knew better than to answer.

"Go play in the back yard," said Billy's mother, when his nap time was over. "I'm cleaning the house."

"Yes ma'am," said Billy.

He took his bow with him.

The ant under the window was dead. Billy buried it in the sandbox so his mother wouldn't see it. First he pulled out the arrows. They were covered with yellow ant blood.

"Cool," said Billy.

He wiped them off in the grass and looked around for more ants to kill.

He didn't have to look far.

There was an ant on the seat of Billy's swing.

It was as big as a cat. It had a sharp snout and big pincers. It was waving its legs and trying to swing.

Billy shot it three times but the arrows bounced off. Then he got the pitchfork out of the garden shed and speared the ant through the middle. He pinned it to the ground and watched it die.

Billy kicked the ant's body into the bushes and swung for a while. Then he got tired of swinging and spun around.

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"Suppertime," said Billy's mother, from the house.

"In a minute," said Billy.

There was an ant between him and the back door. It was as big as a dog. He would have to kill it, but how?

Billy got the shovel out of the garden shed and raised it over his head. It was heavy and the blade was sharp.

He hit the ant twice, breaking it into three pieces. He watched from the back steps as each piece died separately.

Then he went inside to eat.

"How big do ants get?"

"How should I know?" said Billy's mother. "Eat your brussels sprouts."

"I don't like brussel sprouts," said Billy.

"Eat them anyway," said his mother. "Then you can watch TV for one hour before bedtime."

Billy was watching his favorite show when he felt the couch rock, back and forth.

Uh oh, he thought.

He waited till his mother left the room, then looked behind the couch.

There was an ant, as big as a boy. It was looking up at him. Each eye was made out of lots of little eyes.

Billy grabbed a poker from the fireplace and jammed it into the ant's eyes, first one and then the other. Yellow stuff came out. After a while, the couch stopped rocking.

"What are you doing?" asked Billy's mother.

"Nothing," said Billy.

"Bedtime," said Billy's mother.

There was a little hatchet by the fireplace. Billy's father used it for splitting kindling.

Billy took it to bed with him.

"Can I leave the light on?" he asked.

"You know you're too big for that," said Billy's mother.

* * *

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Billy's room was dark.

The house was quiet.

Something was in the closet, thumping. It sounded big.

Billy got out of bed and pushed his dresser against the closet door. It was heavy and hard to move.

It wasn't heavy enough, though. At about midnight the dresser began to slide. The closet door creaked open.

Billy hid under the covers, but the ant knew where to find him. It was as big as a man. It had a sharp snout and huge pincers. It had long hairy legs. It climbed up onto the bed and pulled at the covers with its pincers.

It pulled them off.

Billy swung the hatchet. He chopped off two legs but the ant kept coming. Billy swung again and the ant grabbed the hatchet with its sharp snout and snapped it in half.

Then it snapped Billy in half.

"Where's Billy?" asked Billy's dad, the next day, when he got home.

"The ants ate him," said Billy's mother.

"Those little devils," said Billy's dad. "That Billy was a nice boy. Look. I even brought him a present."

He took it out of the bag.

It was an ant farm.

Billy's mother held it up to the light. "Billy wouldn't have liked it anyway," she said. "They're all dead."

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One of the masters of modern fantasy writing, Gene Wolfe is the author of The Book of the New Sun, Peace, Soldier of the Mist, *and most recently,* Knight *and* Wizard. *His short stories have been collected in many volumes, including last year's* Innocents Aboard *and this year's* Starwater Strains.

"The Gunner's Mate" is classic Wolfe: elliptical, unsettling, and most effective.

The Gunner's Mate

By Gene Wolfe

I KNEW SHE WAS THE ONE from the first time she set foot on the island. Muriel her name is. I heard the others call her so. Dark, and black hair with waves in it, hair like the sea on a quiet night when the moon is hid. She's the lass.

"There's something about this island — " Muriel began.

Liza shook her head. "I don't like it either."

"I didn't mean that. I didn't mean that at all." Muriel put down her piña colada. "It feels, well, welcoming. It keeps telling me I'm home, that it's where I'm supposed to be."

"You'd better quit drinking this pineapple stuff."

"I've only had one," Muriel protested. "This is my second. You're on your third."

"Kirk drank my first one. Can't you feel the hostility? The terrible loneliness? It's like — I don't know. It makes me think of a haunted house fifty miles from nowhere."

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"You've lived in New York too long."

"Three years. Not even as long as you." Liza turned to call a lanky blonde. "C'mere, Ashley. Portia here wants a second witness."

Muriel protested that they had two already.

"She says this place is just ever so sweet, and I say it's about as sweet as — I dunno. Jail. A bad hospital in Arkansas. You know."

Ashley put down the rum punch she had brought from the cabana and pulled up a chair. "It gives me the creeps. If it's so nice, Muriel, why is this hotel so small?"

"That's part of what's nice. A little hotel with lots of beach and this lovely garden. No crowds. No souvenir stands, no cabs running around blowing their horns."

"It's the only hotel on the island. The only *thing* on the island, really. Nobody lives here but the employees, and most of them can't wait to get away. The housekeeper told us."

Liza nodded confirmation.

"But it — " Muriel paused, baffled. "Don't you see? It's a mountain — a mountain the sea couldn't drown. It was too tall, too proud. It's still here, going up and up and welcoming palms and vines and those big jungle trees in the garden. Welcoming birds and little lizards that look like jewelry."

He'll be back. That long I've waited. Now she's come. She's the sign, my lass is. He's makin' signal for me, and he'll come, too.

Morgan.

Henry Morgan won't forget his old shipmate, nor his gold.

"Look!" Muriel exhibited her tarnished treasure. "Look what I found."

Kirk trotted down the beach to look, trailed by Liza.

"I found it in the sand. Is it a coin? It's not even round, not really."

Kirk took it and showed it to Liza, and Liza said, "That's Latin, there at the edge, I think."

"There's some sort of cross thing, too."

Kirk studied the coin in the sunlight. "A coat of arms on the other side. I don't know whose."

"Is it real?"

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Slowly he nodded. "Silver, I think, and very old. It's bound to be valuable."

"I'm keeping it," Muriel announced. She took it back and put it in her beach bag.

Muriel. Muriel. Like sunshine on the water, my Muriel is. The kind of lass you want to hang onto forever. Captain can marry us. Aye! She's no whore.

Mine. Mine, I say! I'll kill the man that so much as touches her. Shared that lass in Panama like a good 'un, didn't I? Here, shipmates! Have a go, I said.

Her screamin' all the while. If she hadn't...If she had liked it....

A looker, she were. A fine wench, only not like this 'un. Not like Muriel. There's no other like to my Muriel, not if you sailed the world around.

"But what about this particular island?" Muriel had asked the manager after he had reeled off a brief, inaccurate history of the Virgins. "What about our island?"

He shook his head. "This island has no history, Ms. Stevens."

"Oh, come on! Every place has history."

"Not this one. There was no fresh water here, you see. Not for human beings. The birds get by on rainwater, puddles left after it rains and water caught in big leaves. But no one could live here until we went inland and drilled a well. There's a pumping station, and an underground main that supplies this hotel. Because there was no water, nobody lived here till our hotel was built."

Dylan had asked, "Who died here?" Dylan had said nothing until then; his slender limbs and torso had been slick with sunblock, and Muriel remembered that bodies had once been anointed for burial.

Now she put her finger between the pages and mused on that before going back to her book — old poetry, because it seemed to her that old poetry meant something, sometimes, while new poetry never did.

"That for itself can woo the approaching fight,
And turn what some deem danger to delight;

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That seeks what cravens shun with more than zeal,
And where the feebler faint, can only feel — "

A bird, a little green parrot with a flaming scarlet head, had fluttered down to perch on the back of her other deck chair and regard her through one bright, black eye.

"Pretty Polly," Muriel told it. She had never talked to a parrot before, and found she felt rather as Alice must have when she had addressed the dodo and the mouse. "You're a pretty bird, Lory, and I wish I had a thimble to give you."

The little parrot bobbed its head three times and fluttered its wings as if to fly, but did not.

"Would you like some water?" Muriel recalled what the manager had said about the birds' reliance on rainwater. "I could go in there and get you some, or crackers out of the hotel's stash. But I'm afraid you'd be frightened if I moved that much."

The parrot fluttered up to the railing of her balcony, and cocked its head again.

It seemed to be asking whether it was welcome, Muriel thought; so she said, "I like you a lot, Lory. I'll never hurt you, I promise, or let anyone else hurt you. And I'll never put you in a cage. You can trust me."

It fluttered down to her footrest and advanced toward her feet by tiny, sidelong steps.

It was too large, she decided, to perch on one finger; but she held out her hand, moving it slowly, palm up. "Here. Wouldn't you like to perch on here?"

The parrot did, and rode on her shoulder when she went down to the cabana.

"After that it came into my room with me," she explained to Kevin and Alexis, "and I opened that jar of cashews from the hotel and gave it some, and a big drink of water. I keep the French doors open, so it knows I'm not locking it in." She waved toward the front of the cabana, which was open to the sea. "Lory can go anytime she wants. I told her that. She's just as free with me as — "

"I know, a bird," Alexis said. "I wouldn't let the housekeeper see it if I were you, Mur. She looks like a stickler."

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"It's probably a male," Kevin added.

Muriel smiled. "I wouldn't want to make Rick jealous. So I say *she*."

"And Laurie," Alexis added. "Laurie's a girl's name."

"Lory because that was the parrot in *Alice*. I was sitting there on my balcony talking to a bird, and I thought 'curiouser and curiouser.'"

From Kevin's expression, *Alice* meant nothing to him. "Does it talk?"

"I think she's trying," Muriel told him. "Something about peas."

"They ate pea soup on those old pirate ships," Alexis told her.

Muriel cocked an eyebrow. "You've lost me."

"Well, pirates and parrots go together."

Kevin nodded. "Parrots live a long, long time."

She liked him. Aye! Liked both my gifts. And she'll like me.

Dear Mur,

I am writing in the hope that this will catch up with you on some wonderful dessert island and the desserts do not make you too fat. Lol.

Seriously, Mur, I miss you lots and lots. Dad died and I had to stay home for all that, and all I could think about the whole time was wishing I was there with you like we planned.

Work is good. Tim and Joe are reporting to me now. Remember them?

Next winter we'll crew on the *Oxford*, and by the end of the voyage you'll be a better sailor than I am. Did you know that captains can marry people at sea?

Love,
Rick

Lory was gone in the morning. Muriel shrugged and sighed, showered, and did other morning things. It had been wonderful while it lasted, she told herself, and she could not have taken Lory with her when she left the island. New York? That would have been too cruel.

Kevin asked to join her in the coffee shop. She nodded, but added, "I hope Alexis won't be jealous."

"We'll ask her over as soon as she comes down. I wanted to speak to you privately, though. Just for a minute. Who was that man with you at the pig roast?"

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"Kirk," Muriel said, "you know him. I sat with Kirk and Liza."

"Not him. The big one." Kevin was leaning toward her, almost whispering.

"There wasn't any other one."

"Yes, there was. You know. Late, when we were sitting around the fire."

Liza appeared in the doorway, looking to Muriel just then rather like the Riders of Rohan. Muriel rose and waved. "Liza, join us! Plenty of room here."

Liza grinned as she sat down. "I was looking for you, Mur. Who was that fascinating man with you?"

Muriel could only stare.

"Last night, when we were singing around the fire."

Kevin added, "The bass."

Liza nodded energetically. "Didn't he have the most wonderful voice? I felt as though the waves and the wind were singing, too."

"I don't know who you're talking about," Muriel said; she spoke so softly that neither Alexis nor Kevin heard her.

"Those muscles!" Liza was addressing Kevin. "And there was something about his eyes...."

Too loudly, Muriel said, "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"I'm sure he wasn't with you." Quickly, Liza turned diplomatic. "He just happened to be sitting next to you, and we wondered about him. A hunk. He had a bandana instead of a hat."

Dylan joined the group, adding, "Tattoos. He had designs on both arms."

"And a machete, Mur. A great big jungle knife with a brass guard. Does he guide tours for the hotel? Through the jungle and up the mountain?"

"That was," Muriel drew a deep breath, "the most beautiful night of my whole vacation, and you're spoiling it for me. I felt so...."

"I used to have a — a friend somewhat like that," Dylan said. "The tattoos, you know. I...I — I liked him very much for a while. He was dangerous, though, and I found that out. Very dangerous. I want to warn you."

When Alexis had come in and Dylan had gone, Liza said, "He wants to move in on you, Mur. You saw that, didn't you? I'm not after this guy

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for myself at all. I have Kirk, and that's fine with me. I'm just interested for your sake."

THE WATER was above the seamen's knees as they unloaded the boat: a chest, picks and shovels, and a long bundle wrapped in canvas. Their captain waited on the beach, a man of average height or a little less, who stood very straight and saw everything with eyes that could have been a hawk's. His red coat was trimmed with gold lace, and his black, loose-legged boots rose as high as the waves that slapped his men's thighs, though the boot tops were turned down. He held a leather-bound book.

Muriel stood at the edge of the hole the sailors had dug, staring down at the chest. Two sailors climbed into that hole and accepted the shrouded bundle from two more. They laid it on the chest (reverently, she thought) and climbed out.

"'Remember him before the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl is broken, before the pitcher is shattered at the spring and the wheel is broken at the well, before the dust returns to the earth as it began and the spirit returns to God who gave it.'"

The captain in the red coat closed his book and tucked it under his arm. "Farewell, old shipmate. You were a brave man, a fine gunner, and an honest friend. Keep a weather eye on our money."

He turned to the seamen. "We'll be back for it, won't we, lads?"

His sailors muttered assent as they began to fill the hole.

Muriel woke with a start, blinked, and rubbed her eyes. The tale the waves had told was over, and they seemed to wait her judgment, murmuring from crest to crest. The beach they washed was empty and silent, the sun hot.

She rose, pushing up her straying sunglasses and wondering whether she had sweated off her sun-block. Down the beach, something caught the light, flashing as though a bit of the sun itself had fallen there. She dug it out of the sand, a wobbly-round gold coin somewhat larger than a quarter.

"I'd like to talk," Muriel told the manager. "In your office, where we can sit down. Can we do that?"

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"Certainly." He sighed, looking wearier than ever. "I take it there's a problem."

"No," she said. "Yes, I mean. Yes, there is. But only for me. I have a problem, and I'd like to tell you about it. I want to ask you for a job."

Seated behind his battered little desk, the manager cleared his throat. He was smaller than most men, and looked fastidious as well as tired. Seeing him now, Muriel wondered what he had done before he had been sent here to run this hotel. A department store, she decided. He had bossed the clerks in a department store.

"Let me warn you in advance that I don't think it will be possible, Ms. Stevens. You have no job on the mainland?"

"I'm an attorney. A very junior associate in a law firm."

"I see."

"You're going to say that nothing you could offer me here would pay as much. I don't care. In the first place, my job pays very little and it costs a lot to live in New York. I couldn't live there at all if it weren't for the help I get from my parents."

"But your prospects...." The manager let the thought trail away.

"Are golden, supposedly. In ten years I might be somebody important. Or not. I don't care."

"Wages here are very low." He emphasized the *very*.

"I won't ask for any." The set to Muriel's jaw and the gleam in her brown eyes would have startled her friends. "You can pay me whatever you like, or nothing. I want a room and meals. Give me those — and one other thing — and I'll do whatever you tell me to. You'll find I'm a self-starter and a hard worker. Conscientious, too. I'm not bragging, just quoting from my last review."

Was he afraid she was planning to sue? She added, "If I'm not what you expected or what you need, fire me and I'll walk out without a word of protest. No hard feelings, and that's a promise."

"A small room at the top of the hotel."

She nodded. "A place to sleep and wash."

"And meals."

She nodded again. "I may lounge on the beach when I'm off work, but I won't mistake myself for a guest or hang around the cabana. That's another promise. Sir."

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"Those, and one other thing."

"Yes. I want — "

His raised hand stopped her. "Not yet. I'm curious. Why? Tell me why you want to stay with us."

She swallowed, trying to muster the words.

"You don't have to tell me, of course. But I want to know. I'll take it as a favor."

"I'm in paradise. I grew up in Buffalo. I went to Yale. I work in New York. I never knew how awful those places were until I came here."

"Many people," the manager said slowly, "are not quite comfortable here."

"I know that. I don't understand, but they've told me. No, I do understand. This island is the place for me, not the place for them. Why, I don't know."

"And you think you could do hotel work."

She nodded. "It would depend on the job, of course. I can cook a little, but I'm no chef. I suppose I could learn whatever a bartender has to know in a few days. Anything else, yes."

"I see." The manager studied his nails as if wondering whether he should cut them. "What is the one other thing?"

"I have a — a boyfriend."

"Not here."

"You're very observant, sir. You're correct, he's not here. He had to cancel at the last minute when his father went into intensive care."

The manager nodded.

"They're building a replica of the *Oxford*. Do you know about that? Somebody found the plans. It was one of Sir Henry Morgan's ships."

The manager nodded. "I think I saw a news story about it."

"Next year it will sail the Caribbean for a month, with an unpaid volunteer crew. He — his name is Rick — and I have signed up to be part of that crew. I'll need a month off, four weeks of unpaid leave. But since I'll work without pay if that's how you'd like to do it, it doesn't really make any difference."

The manager pursed his lips. "In order that you can stay here."

"Yes." She nodded, wondering whether she was winning or losing.

"If I had an opening, I'd accept your offer, Ms. Stevens. I can tell

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that you're sincere, and that you'd be an asset for as long as you stayed with us."

He sighed, toying with a long yellow pencil. "The sailing-ship business will come at the height of the season, but it really doesn't make any difference."

She nodded. "I'm glad you agree."

"It doesn't," the manager said slowly, "because it's a year off. You'd tire of our island and your new position long before the year was out."

She shook her head, and he smiled bitterly. "You may trust me on that, Ms. Stevens. Personnel turnover in the hotel field is high. Here, at our hotel, it is higher than average."

"There must be something I can do." Her hands had clenched of themselves. She forced them to unclench. "Can't you use another waitress?"

"No. You would work without pay, I know. You don't have to tell me so again. You would, but I couldn't take you up on that offer. I'd have to put you on the payroll at minimum wage, and I'm not authorized another employee. Give me your number back on the mainland, and I'll notify you as soon as I've an opening."

As though he sensed her despair, he added, "Which will be soon. Remember what I told you about turnover."

Muriel had set out to climb the mountain alone, and had (to her own surprise) made it two thirds of the way before she had been forced to turn back. Now — scratched, soaked with perspiration, and bone-weary — she had just stumbled out of the night into the soft light of the rather too air-conditioned lobby.

Someone screamed, and moved by an instinct far older than the human race, she dashed to the screamer to provide whatever help she could.

The woman — a large woman in a flowered print — screamed again. Muriel dropped to her knees and embraced her.

"*He — he....*"

"He attacked you," Muriel said. "I understand. We'll get you to a doctor." (Were there police on the island?)

"Cut me! He cut me!"

"Calm down." The light was weak and watery, but it seemed to Muriel that there was no blood. "You're shaking like a leaf."

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The large woman shut her eyes and screamed again.

At once (or so it seemed to Muriel when she recalled it later) there were a dozen other people standing or kneeling around them.

"He cut me," the large woman repeated. "He was — was — was — " She closed her eyes and screamed once more. There was terror in that scream, as there had been in the others. There was an aching agony beneath the terror; it might have been the scream of a soul in Hell.

THE BOAT from the big island took the large woman away. By the time she had been sedated and led aboard, Muriel had been told by a dozen acquaintances that the large woman was — had been — the housekeeper, and had learned to speak of her as Mrs. Schall.

"*Rick!*" She gaped, and he grinned. Almost before gape or grin began, they rushed together. A long kiss and another, and another. Then she was, somehow, holding his bag; and he was carrying her and his bag, too, she cradled in his arms like a child and his bag in her lap, held there only when her arms were not around his neck.

Eventually they sat in the cabana, she with a piña colada, he with rum-and-cola. They were (to put it mildly) soon joined by others.

"This is Rick, Alexis," Muriel said a trifle formally. "I've told you about him. Rick, this is my friend Alexis Bennett."

"Rick, this is Alexis's friend Dylan — "

"Wait up!" Alexis banged her own piña colada (probably her third, Muriel decided) down on the table. "Rick, you couldn't come with Muriel. There was a death in the family?"

Rick nodded, and stopped smiling. "My father."

"So what the hell are you doing here all of a sudden?"

"Joining Muriel." The smile had not come back. "I went to my dad's funeral. I stood there and watched while the coffin was let down into the grave." Rick paused.

"All that rubbish. I should have been there when he went into the hospital. It would've counted for something. It would've mattered, at least to him. When I got there, he was as good as dead and it was all formality, just a song and dance to comfort the living."

"Rick got a direct flight to Saint Thomas as soon as he could," Muriel

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explained to the group at large. "He has three days leave left. When they're up, we'll go back. Together."

Liza said, "I thought you wanted to stay here."

"I do. I want to be with Rick, too. I can't do both, or not right now at least. Next year, we'll be back." She paused. "I may be back before then. I don't know."

Kirk spoke to Rick. "This island is haunted. Don't say nobody told you." Someone else asked, "Did you see the crazy woman?" and he shook his head.

"You must have," Alexis said. "They had her right there at the pier when you got off." (Alexis looked sunburned, and Muriel knew in that moment that Alexis was older than she had ever supposed.)

"She thought her arm had been cut off. A man was hiding in her room — this is what she said — and when she came in he cut it off. It wasn't off, of course. But it just hung there." The sympathy in Alexis's face looked tough and a little wilted, like cabbage pulled from a dumpster.

"Paralyzed," someone else put in.

Nothing anyone said after that mattered to Muriel. She was looking at Rick, who had raised his drink and set it down again untasted. Around them, meaningless sounds ebbed and flowed. "I love you," he whispered.

She nodded, her mouth dry. "I love you, too." It sounded horribly inadequate.

He rose, and she with him.

"Mur, I'm going on a walk. Down the beach, I don't know how far." He shrugged, and his eyes left hers to peer sightlessly out to sea. "Clear around the island, maybe, if that's possible. Dad's gone, and there's my job, and you, and this island you love so much, and a hundred other things. All sorts of things. I have to sort them out. Some of them, anyway. If you're angry, I don't blame you. But it's been days now since I've had a real chance to think, and I've got to do it before I make some God-awful mistake."

"I'm not mad," Muriel said. And then, "Come back to me?"

"I will." Suddenly, his smile was in place again, shining as though it had never gone. "I'll be back, and that's a promise."

She had waited there in the cabana, apart from the others, until the bartender had come to tell her the manager needed to see her. "It's urgent," the bartender whispered. "He needs to see you right away."

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At first she had hardly heard him, but when he had repeated his message she nodded and rose. "Are you from Iowa?"

He had shaken his head, a lean blond kid about twenty with hands that seemed a trifle too large. "Why did you think that?"

"You look it. That's all."

And he had shaken his head again and muttered, "Wisconsin."

Philadelphia, she thought when she was back in the hotel and looking at the manager. *Philly, or maybe Baltimore.*

"I have good news and I have bad news." The manager was making an effort to smile. "You know about Mrs. Schall. You were the one who found her first, as I remember."

Muriel nodded.

The manager swallowed visibly. "My good news is that a position has opened up now. Not a menial position. A management position."

Muriel nodded again.

"Mrs. Schall's, of course. You were the first to speak to her, I believe."

"Yes," Muriel said, "I was."

"Our staff is divided by function, with the manager in charge of each function reporting me. The housekeeper is the most important subordinate I have. It is her duty to supervise the maids. It has been my experience that no other area requires so much supervision. Our cooks will produce good meals even if they are left unsupervised. There may be some fall-off in elegance of presentation, but other deterioration comes slowly if at all. Our cooks take an admirable pride in their work. Our wait-staff and bartenders work largely for tips, and thus strive to please our guests. The bell-staff is the same."

The manager tapped the top of his battered little desk and took a moment to stare out the window. "The maids are a different proposition — very different indeed. They are rarely tipped, and our guests rarely see them working. Yet the reputation of the hotel depends very largely upon the work they do. They need constant supervision, and that supervision must be firm but fair. Do you think you can provide it?"

"You said you had bad news as well as good. Perhaps I should hear the bad news, too. I hope it's not that Mrs. Schall won't recover."

"It is not." The manager glanced at his watch. "I'd like to buy you dinner, Ms. Stevens. Are you as hungry as I am?"

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"Yes," she said, though only after she had agreed did she realize it was true. Furthermore, dinner would give her time to think, which was vastly more important. More important still, she might see Rick, if he had returned from his hike. "I'd like that very much, sir. It's very generous of you."

They ate in the dining room, although she had hoped for the coffee shop. The manager ordered a bloody mary, she a glass of white wine; after some debate, they agreed to split an appetizer of coconut shrimp and told a waitress who was plainly bemused to see him dining with a guest.

"It's rather nice," he told Muriel, "working and living in a hotel. Food whenever you want it, and a place to nap when your work keeps you up half the night. Nice not just for me, but for our bell captain, our maintenance engineer, and the other managers. You will find it so, too, Ms. Stevens. Or so I hope."

Drinks arrived, and she smiled and sipped her wine, waiting.

"You asked whether poor Mrs. Schall was expected to recover. At this stage, I doubt that anyone can say. After six weeks, her doctors may have some idea." The manager coughed. "With these mental cases one never knows, even so. You understand, I hope, Ms. Stevens, that if her position here is filled in her absence top management will reassign her. The company has more than fifty inns and hotels altogether."

Their coconut shrimp arrived. He ordered grilled grouper, she pollo con piña a la Antigua.

"You wanted my bad news." He looked around at the tables nearest theirs; all were empty. "Very well, you have a right to hear it. It is that there is a rebellion brewing among our maids."

He paused to let her speak, but she did not.

"Superstition, of course. Mere superstition. They are afraid, and each frightens the others. Some of them have hardly courage enough to enter the rooms they are to clean. Phantom attackers!"

The manager took a long swallow from his bloody mary, and patted his lips with his napkin. "It's quite difficult to retain maids here, Ms. Stevens. We're remote. You understand, I'm sure. We must have women without families, unless they're married to male staff members, as a few are. There are no shops. We try to make allowances and see to it that each gets a few days on the big island every month. Still, it's hard. We lose maids

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throughout the season. One in December and two in January, only too often. This is the first time the whole group has ever threatened to resign in mass. Your first task, if you take the job, will be to keep as many as you can."

He waited, licking his lips, while she chewed and swallowed half a coconut shrimp. At length she said, "I understand, sir."

"It would be wonderful if you could persuade them all to stay, but I don't expect it. Frankly, I think that will be impossible. But keep as many as you can. That's all I ask. You are persuasive, and I'm counting on you to exert your powers on them. Will you take the job?"

"I don't know," Muriel said. "I might."

He smiled as though she had agreed. "Good. That leave you wanted next season. You'll get it, and I'll put that in writing if you want. You'll find me flexible in that matter and in just about every other matter. The salary isn't much, but you'll be able to bank nearly all of it, since a nice room and food are included. Paid medical, of course. A month's paid vacation every year, although you will be required to remain here for the whole of our busy season."

Muriel took a deep breath. "May I have twenty-four hours to think it over, sir?"

The bartender from Wisconsin reported that Rick had not returned; she ordered another glass of wine and carried it to a chair on the beach.

The sun was down, but the wind was soft and warm. Latin numbers and old fashioned rock-and-roll drifted from the cabana while a hundred thousand stars, twinkling into sight like so many wildflowers opening, provided a silent music of their own. *An older and a sweeter music,* Muriel thought, *the music of the Women's Dance, danced before any man had lifted his face to the sky.*

In time, the music from the cabana was stilled.

Daylight woke her. She yawned and stretched, and wondered what her friends in New York would say when she told them she had slept all night on the beach — then wondered whether she would ever see those friends again.

Rick had not come. Or had not wished to disturb her sleep.

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Or had not seen her in the darkness.

Had — perhaps — simply cut through the gardens to reach the hotel. The liquor in the cabana could be locked away in wire-fronted cabinets, as it no doubt was; but the cabana itself could not be locked — it was too open and too flimsy, and there were restrooms there.

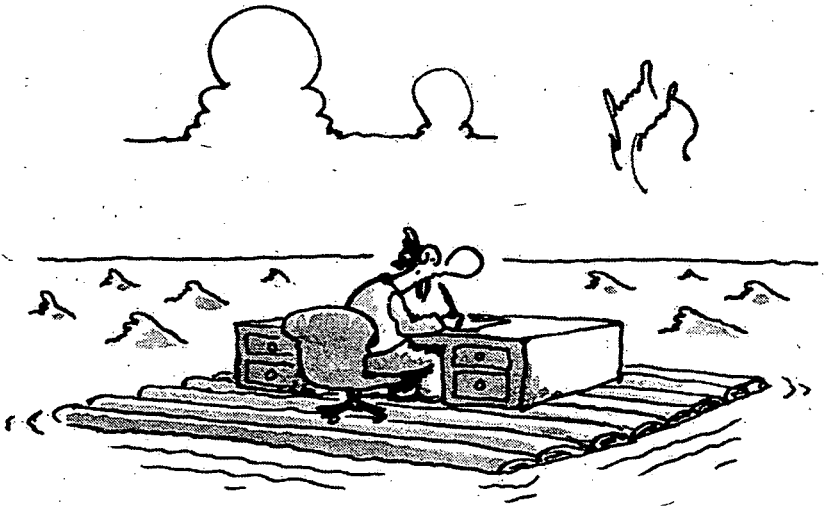
When she left the cabana, a scratched and somewhat dirty Rick was striding down the beach toward her, grinning. She shouted and dashed over the sand to him, and he kissed her as he had never kissed her before, wrapping her in arms as hard and strong as oak.

"Oh, Rick!" she said when they parted, and felt that she would faint.

His laughter was thunder across the sea until they kissed again.

"I was afraid, so terribly, terribly afraid, that I would never see you again."

"Make easy, lass." He held her still tighter. "I'll not leave ye." Green, red, and swift, Lory fluttered from the biggest tree in the garden to settle on his shoulder.



Memo to self: quit writing memos to self.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

STAR WARS, THEY'RE NOT

BY THE TIME you read this, the Ides of Lucas (May 19) will have long since come, though perhaps not gone. As I write, the *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* opening is hard upon us, and would that I were there to exult in the rich cinematic tapestry it doubtless provides; to partake of the sophisticated dialogue for which Lucas is renowned; to be in the theater while a John Williams score washes knee-deep along the aisles, as if a sewer main has broken, releasing a particularly noisome form of bombast; and to reexperience, against the background noise of critics woodling over whether this latest incarnation of GL's Vapid-O-Thon is too dark for the kiddies (Too dark? For children raised on the War on Terror and Grand Theft Auto?), the cultural phenomenon of America going to the movies, our America, George Bush's America, a nation of declining intellect and energy expressing its collective will with a unanimity it otherwise lacks, applauding like seals for a fish at the sight of dueling puppets, their glee interrupted now and then by enormous figures dressed as Darth Vader and Chewbacca, who block out the screen as they trundle back and forth to the refreshment stand, toting tubs of popcorn and two-pound packets of Raisinets. But, alas, that pleasure has been denied me, and I have been forced to review a couple of films that, albeit not classics, at least won't inspire you to attempt self-slaughter by jamming an R2D2 action figure down your throat.

Robert Pratten's *London Voodoo*, a low budget indie film that will soon have an American DVD release (it received no theatrical play in this country), is something of an

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old-fashioned girl, a horror movie that builds suspense slowly, meticulously, through character development and story, rather than, as most such films resort to doing, slathering on the gore and the shoddy effects. Lincoln and Sarah (Doug Cockle and Sara Stewart) are a thirty-something New York couple who have relocated to London, where she hopes their marriage will be renewed. Lincoln hopes, on the other hand, that Sarah will find London a sufficient distraction to keep her out of his hair while he pursues his career, the very thing that has caused their marital problems in the first place. When Sarah, during the process of renovating their new home, discovers a voodoo grave in the cellar, wherein lie a brace of mummies locked in a lovers' coupling, she begins to change, eventually changing so drastically as regards her strength and sexuality that she commands the attention of even her career-driven husband.

Pratten, who also wrote the screenplay, has crafted a neat metaphor here, using Sarah's possession by an African female warrior to emblematize the dynamics of a marriage in severe decline, and at the same time he has given us the most realistic depiction of the voodoo belief system ever put on film. This is not to say that he neglects the mystery aspect of the plot. Does the new au pair, Kelly (Vonda Barnes), hired to care for Sarah's baby, have anything to do with a voodoo conspiracy? She certainly establishes her sinister bent by methodically crushing a snail and later seems to have developed an unhealthy infatuation with Lincoln, going so far as to poison Sarah — a course of action from which she pulls back. Who is the black man who pounds on the Lincoln's door and shouts, "Your family is in danger!"? And what part does the local historian play? She's an elderly woman who reveals the bloody history of the house, most pertinently that two people died in a fire there in 1902, and appears to know a lot more that she isn't telling. These questions have scarcely been fully framed, let alone resolved, when Sarah begins collecting her husband's hair and toenail clippings, covering herself with food, and seducing a construction worker, an evolution that does not end until she's armed herself with a makeshift spear, painted her body with mystical designs, and has taken to urinating in pots she places on the kitchen floor. And thus the scene is set for a devastating climax.

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As mentioned, *London Voodoo* is an old-school horror movie that calls to mind the Hammer films of the 1970s, though *LV* is better scripted and has much better acting. Sara Stewart is absolutely enthralling in her transition from repressed American mom to super-aggressive mojo queen — it's a caliber of performance that, were it not embedded in a genre picture few will ever see, might well have earned Stewart some serious attention. The rest of the multicultural cast performs admirably in her support, especially Barnes, whose kittenish yet malefic turn as the au pair seems the product of a purer form of evil than does Stewart's African warrior princess, who mostly seems angered at the violence done her in a previous incarnation. *LV* is such a carefully thought-out film, its script so reflective of that thought, I have no doubt that this is part of Pratten's subtext.

When *Nochnoy Dozor*, or *Night Watch*, the blockbuster Russian epic fantasy (it outgrossed *The Return of the King* at the Russian box office), receives its long overdue American theatrical release this summer, it will be vastly improved over the import DVD that I happened to see. For one thing, courtesy of Fox Searchlight, the movie will be shown in, reportedly, a streamlined new cut, and for another, the subtitles, which on the DVD were incompetent at best and helped to render more confusing what may seem to many Americans a confusing film.... The sub-titles will have been redone and, further, will be incorporated into the actual frames, coming across more like word balloons, rather than trailing along the bottom of the picture. It's such a startlingly simple innovation, you wonder why it's not been tried before, since this technique will serve to keep the viewer's attention focused on the screen, not divided between reading and seeing. In whatever form one sees it, however, *NW* is a remarkable achievement.

The movie opens with a CGI-heavy prologue that sets the scene: It seems that the world we inhabit is composed of human beings and Others, a motley crew of wizards, vampires, shape-shifters, et al, and the Others are split among those who follow the Light and those who serve the Dark (go figure!). A thousand years ago they joined in a great battle that resulted in a truce being made between the opposing sides, the terms of which dictated that, among other things, no one may

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use magic in public and they must leave humans alone. So as to ensure compliance, the Dark Others patrol the human world during the day, and the Light Others keep the Night Watch. Whether this symbolizes the pre-perestroika relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States, well, I leave that to someone with a knowledge of Russian life, someone who can parse some of the subtle cultural references in the film; but the inference seems inescapable.

The actual story begins with a sad-eyed everyman, Anton Gorodetsky (Konstantin Khabensky), depressed that his ex-girlfriend is now with another man and seeking the help of an old woman who has, she claims, a knowledge of herbs and charms. When the old woman proves to be a Dark Other witch and is busted by the Night Watch for trying to turn Anton toward the service of evil, he learns that he himself is an Other, though not a very powerful one. We jump forward to 2004 in Moscow, a time when the truce has been broken, all the old enmities reinvigorated, and war is threatening to break out, with humanity caught in the crossfire. Now a fully initiated member of the Night Watch, Anton is patrolling the Dark with two colleagues, traveling through the city in a jet-propelled truck (either humans don't notice it in jet-mode or else contemporary Muscovites have become immune to shock). Using his slender powers of foresight, he's trying to help a boy who's being pursued by two Dark vampires and may be the Other foretold by prophecy who will tip the balance of power in favor of one side or another during the final battle. One of the more interesting facets of what is, essentially, standard fantasy cha-cha, is that the forces of the Light are not morally superior — not markedly so, at any rate — to the forces of the Dark, and, in what may be another Cold War reference, folks are switching sides with some frequency.

These materials may seem like nothing special, but director Timur Bekmambetov, who co-authored the script along with Sergei Lukyanenko, who wrote the source novels, does his best to put a fresh spin on them. While he shows his influences — Terry Gilliam and *Delicatessen*-era Jean-Pierre Jeunet — a little too much, quoting from their films at times, Gilliam and Jeunet are not such bad influences to show when you're trying to enliven an oft-told tale. The use of Gilliam- and Jeunet-esque hyperkinetic visuals to convey the despair

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and chaos of a grungy contemporary Moscow populated by vampires, shape-shifters, and so on is artfully apt and allows Bekmambetov to inject a necessary humor into what otherwise would be a thoroughly grim proceeding. Bekmambetov borrows heavily from various and sundry. For instance, Anton is given an owl as an assistant *à la* Harry Potter, yet unlike Harry's owl, Anton's sheds her feathers and is transformed into a long-legged Russian beauty (Harry's never going do any better than Hermione, I fear). But there are quite a few moments and incidents in the movie that are pure Bekmambetov-Lukyanenko: A wizard named Zavulon whose spine, when removed, becomes a magical sword; the jet-propelled truck, used primarily as a humorous device; an apartment building, in which a cursed woman lives, that is circled constantly by thousands of crows; a battle with vampires who fade in and out of visibility that surely ranks among the most idiosyncratic fight scenes ever filmed. There are also flaws which I hope the new edit has addressed. Most significantly, Bekmambetov's camera tends to wander about during scenes involving large numbers of actors and, while this adds (occasionally) to the visual style, it doesn't help much with continuity and negates the effect of an establishing shot.

For an audience accustomed to the trails of boulder-sized breadcrumbs used to mark plot points in films by Hollywood directors, *NW* will take some getting used to. The film doesn't spoon-feed the viewer, and if you're not paying strict attention, it's easy to lose your way. Hints of a larger story, one with an even wider scope, are salted throughout the film, and these compound the confusion. It should come as no surprise that *NW* is the first film in a trilogy, the second of which is currently in post-production (Fox Searchlight ponied up the funds to enable the completion of the final two films). So, for you trilogy buffs out there, for those of you who felt cheated when the Matrix turned into a bad dream about Hugo Weaving, for those who felt like pulling a Gollum and diving into the Crack of Doom after the One Ring, for those who never recovered from an attack of the clones and for whom Darth Vader as George Bush came too little, too late, this smart, funny, flawed but audaciously mounted Russian epic fantasy might be something of an upgrade. Of course it's no *Star Wars*, but then...what is? ☙

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Jaye Lawrence's first published story, "Kissing Frogs," appeared in our May 2004 issue and wound up on the shortlist for the James Tiptree Award. Ms. Lawrence lives in Minnesota and works as the Director of Web Communications for Carleton College, a university that is better known nowadays for having graduated Lord of the Rings *producer Barry Osborne than for having been the alma mater of onetime Monkee Peter Tork.*

"Fallen Idols," like Esther Friesner's story in this same issue, takes a look at how humans and gods behave.

Fallen Idols

By Jaye Lawrence

ZEUS SHOWED UP ONE NIGHT at the sex addiction meeting in the basement of Christ Lutheran Church. I go a couple of times a month myself. Sometimes three if I'm feeling weak, sometimes not at all if I've done something I don't feel ready to talk about just yet. But Zeus only came that once.

He looked good. Awfully sad, though. He had shoulders as broad as a prize bull's, but they sagged like the weight of the world was on them when he introduced himself and owned up to why he was there.

His wife finally had enough of all the lies, he said, and catching him with this young thing and that. She was gone, and he didn't think she was coming back this time.

I was sort of surprised she'd stuck it out as long as she had. They don't count time like we do, I suppose, but Hera had a hell of a temper on her, you could tell that from the stories we had to read in high school. Temper and a real broad jealous streak too. A lot like my own wife Jeannette, who ripped the phone right off the wall and heaved it at my head when the phone bill showed up with all those sex-chat calls. A real firebrand.

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Jeannette stayed six years.

When he talked his voice rumbled like a thunderhead moving in. He smelled of a storm too. Ozone, and that whiff of rain you get in the wind even before the rain starts to fall. Caroline, our therapist, shifted in her chair every time he spoke. She crossed and uncrossed her legs. She tugged the hem of her straight navy skirt over her knees, like it suddenly struck her as way too short for this particular occasion. A nice woman, Caroline. Real nice and not judgmental at all. We all liked her, even Bob who always tried to bullshit her and always got called on it. But some of us, including me, thought she didn't much understand how it was to feel the grip of forces you couldn't resist. It was all theory with her, and books.

But Zeus got it. You could tell.

His wife had left him before, he told us, but she always came back sooner or later. Weeping and raging both, tears streaming down her face, mad enough to pound on his chest with her fists and slap his face and turn his latest mistress into a bear. But still forgiving him somewhere inside, because despite everything he was the one for her. The only one to ever make her feel like the goddamn queen of heaven. And hadn't they had their good times? God yeah. The best. So she'd go off mad and stay with one of her friends, one he'd never slept with — those got scarcer every year — but eventually she'd come back ready to give it another try. And sometimes it would seem better than before, better than ever. The cheating and the fighting made her crazy, but it turned up the heat between them too.

We nodded. Even smiled a little, imagining it. Makeup sex of the gods.

But this time — this time, he said, her leaving looked to be for good. There was something different in her face. Something in her eyes all final and full of grief, like instead of playing around on her he'd died instead.

His big proud head with its lion's mane of hair drooped down almost to his chest as he described it, saying out loud what he'd probably been afraid to admit even to himself.

I miss her, he said. I don't blame her for going, but I miss her so much.

The broad slabs of his shoulders shook.

Aw, hey, we said. Hey man, hey Z, we understand.

And we did. Maybe our own sins weren't the stuff of myth like his, no, but we understood. All of us had felt it too: the drag of desire like the tide,

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our free will turned to water under the moon. The aching hurtful need as deep as our bones. The secret rituals by night. And afterward, always, the swelling shame and the lies. So many lies offered up to the ones we loved. So many promises broken like shards of old pottery.

He understood us too, I think. Why wouldn't he? All the crimes and temptations of the body are as old as time, older even than him and his crumbling temples. What did his kind leave for us to invent? What can we do but repeat their ancient mistakes? Always chasing that elusive heifer. Burning to be, just once in our lives, not the ugly duckling but the swan.

He stopped talking, wiped his eyes. We all looked away politely for a minute. I looked at Caroline's breasts. I'm not sure where Caroline looked, but her breasts rose and fell with a sigh that said maybe she would understand us a little better after tonight.

It got quiet for a while. Sometimes that happens when somebody puts his heart out there in public like that. You feel like you want to give it a moment of silence. But it also gets quiet if a person's story is so damn low or mean or stupid that you can't think of even one kind or sympathetic thing to say. You sit there like a stump instead, thinking sweet Jesus, does this guy ever deserve a swift kick in the ass. Which may be true, but wouldn't be productive to the process, Caroline would say.

This was that first kind of silence, though. If even half the stories are true, Zeus deserved plenty of ass-kickings in his day. Not to mention a couple of convictions and a whole lot of prison time. But looking at him that night you couldn't see him as that guy, as any kind of seducer or rapist. He just looked so damn sad. He looked like he'd gambled one time too many and lost it all. Wife. Home. Soul too, maybe.

After the silence dragged on past respectful into uncomfortable, I cleared my throat and talked a little about Jeannette and me. I thought it might help Zeus to hear about it. Seeing how much she sounded like his wife and all. They even left sort of the same way, except that Jeannette tore off in my Fiero instead of a chariot of fire.

When I ran out of words, a few of the others chimed in with stories of their own, and Caroline kept after us to think about what we could learn from these mistakes. How low we can go, I wanted to say. How far we can fall when we fly too near the sun. But that wouldn't have been productive either, so I shut my mouth.

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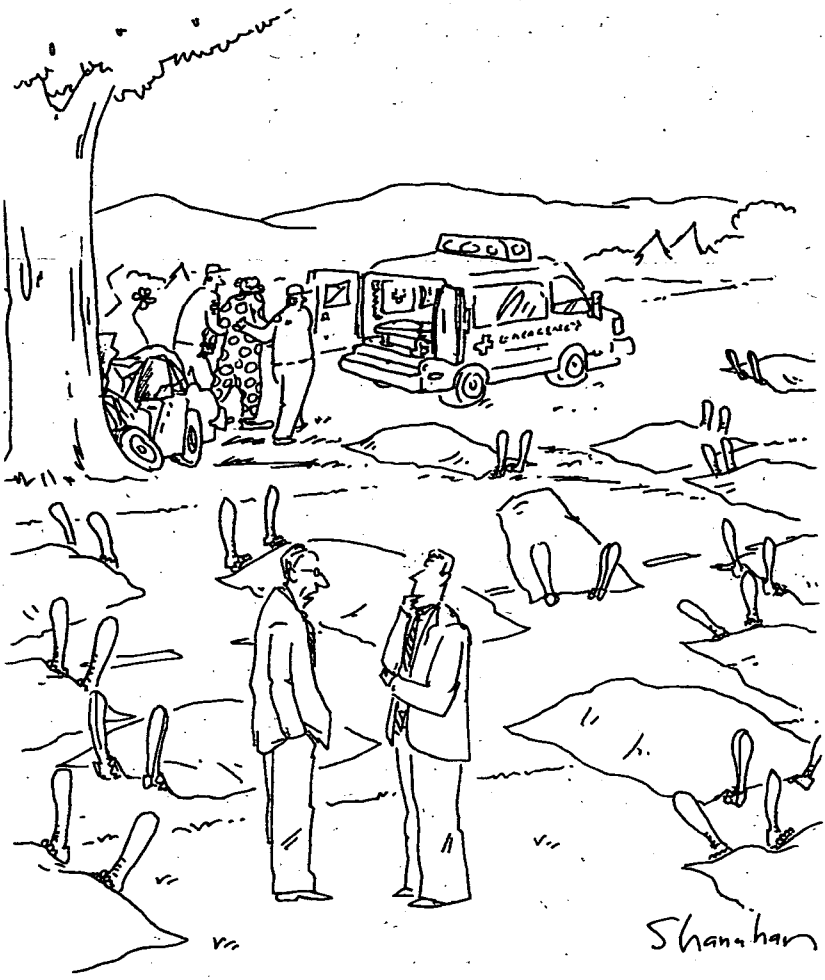
Zeus didn't stay for the coffee and cookies afterward. He never turned up again, except in our fevered dreams and in the fair hair of the child he fathered on Caroline. White blond and so downy, and soft — so soft, that hair, like feathers.



"The driver was the only one wearing a seatbelt."

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John W. Campbell, it is often said, was fond of holding his hands close together and saying (roughly), "Mainstream fiction is like this, while science fiction is like this," at which point he would extend his arms wide.

Mr. Campbell's appreciation of the breadth of science fiction is worth repeating here because Steve Utley's Silurian Tales make such an interesting case in point. These stories (including "Promised Land" from our July 2005 issue and "Invisible Kingdoms" from Feb. 2004) show time travelers who venture back to Earth's early days—but not to live out the kid's dream of walking amidst the dinosaurs. No, they go back farther, to the Silurian Era, and celebrate the ooze and slime that's not long past the primordial stage. In their depictions of the struggles facing everyday scientists and administrators, they mix the mundane and the extraordinary into a very interesting blend.

In sum: it's great to be bringing you science fiction stories, and it's great we have Steve Utley spinning out yarns like this one.

Silv'ry Moon

By Steven Utley

TO THE EXTREME AND obvious annoyance of the civilian liaison, the man whom she had appointed to be the Canepis' guide failed to report to the jump station. She spent barely as much time greeting Dr. and Mrs. Canepi as courtesy dictated before stepping into the corridor to look for the errant guide — who, it immediately transpired, had been lurking there the whole time. The hiss, buzz, and crackle of the jump station duly yielded to a rising duet of recrimination and protests.

"Since when," they heard the man demand, "has this expedition been open to crackpots?"

The liaison's reply was muffled. Dr. Canepi, the shorter of the eavesdroppers, looked up at his wife and demanded, "What did she say?"

Mrs. Canepi explained, with regal calm, "She said, since we paid our own way and promised to behave."

"Ah. What — "

"Shh. Which is more, she said, than she can say for at least one person she knows. Presumably she means our reluctant guide."

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There came a sharp cry. "I am not either a tourist!" It was clear from the man's tone of voice that he knew he might be overheard, and also that he did not care. "I have my work here like everyone else!"

"You're a hanger-on," the liaison said — Dr. Canepi had no trouble hearing her this time, for she now adopted an emphatic, no-nonsense tone laced with asperity; also, almost as though unconscious of the movement, he had edged slightly toward the door — "and it's high time we made some use of you. *Way* past high time."

"It's not like they're here to contribute to the body of data coming out of this expedition!"

"What do *you* contribute to it?"

"Color! Character! I'll have to watch him every minute, or he'll be picking fights with everybody!"

Dr. Canepi thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his safari jacket and rocked slightly on his feet and said, with exaggerated mildness, "We seem to have come at an awkward moment," and smirked, and added, "Those two ought to get married."

"Perhaps they already are."

"That'd certainly explain things."

"Look," they heard the liaison say, "this is a done deal, there's no point in arguing about it. The project's so strapped for money it's taking anyone who can scrape together the price of admission. They're here, it's their nickel, we are going to accommodate them!"

"Well, there's that, too, now that you bring it up — the whole matter of accommodation. They've got to be fed, transported, kept from hurting themselves, and the support force's resources are already stretched thin."

The woman fairly screeched in exasperation. "If that wasn't so lame, it would be pretty funny, coming from an old beach bum. Emphasis on bum. Listen to me and listen well. You are the only resource around here that's going to get stretched. You are going to take extra special good care of these people the whole time they're here. I don't want to hear that they've been mobbed or gotten into a fistfight or anything."

The Canepis backed quickly away from the door a moment before the liaison burst through it with their guide in tow. She was a striking middle-aged woman, in high color but otherwise immaculate in a crisp tropical suit. At first glance, and at second, the guide inspired little confidence. He

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wore the unhappy expression of one who had lost a dishonest coin toss, and he did in fact look every inch an old beach bum, complete to faded Hawaiian shirt, ragged khaki shorts, and amateurishly repaired sandals. The reddish undertone of his loose and leathery skin suggested that he not only spent too much time in the sun but also drank immoderately. The half-open front of his shirt revealed a sinking chest and a slightly protruding belly covered with white hair. He gazed up at Mrs. Canepi and down at Dr. Canepi with exaggerated interest.

The liaison made introductions and told Dr. and Mrs. Canepi pointedly, "This gentleman answers to Kevo. He is completely at your disposal. I must remind you that you are aboard a U.S. Navy ship and subject to its rules and customs while aboard. Ashore, you are subject to civilian authority. I hope your visit to Paleozoic time is an interesting one."

Mrs. Canepi smiled faintly and said, "How could it possibly be dull?"

As she turned to leave them, the liaison shot Kevo an I-am-not-kidding glance from the cover of her professionally bright smile, and he made a face and said, "Well, let's have a nice round of applause for She-who-must-be-obeyed." Then he and his appointed charges submitted to prolonged and frank mutual scrutiny. Dr. Canepi bore a strong resemblance to an owl, even to the flyaway tuft of hair above each of his temples; Mrs. Canepi, a full head taller than he and apparently the better part of two decades younger, was slim and long-limbed and had gray eyes and metallic-red hair.

"If I *should* get into a fistfight, Mister Kevo," Dr. Canepi finally said, "*will* you pull me out, or just referee?"

"Just Kevo. I think, Mister Canepi — "

"Doctor. I am entitled to the honorific."

"Sorry — Doctor." The guide's voice lacked conviction.

"I hold several degrees," Dr. Canepi said, and looked as though he expected the statement to be challenged.

"Well, to sort of answer your question, we're just going to keep away from the geoscientists. They're the main ones you don't want to piss off. The ones who work with their hands and sharp pointy things, and drink a lot after hours."

"I should think," Dr. Canepi said, almost as though in masochistic anticipation, "I'd have more to fear from the astronomers and physicists present."

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Kevo simply looked at him for a moment, then shook his head. "There aren't many astronomers and physicists present," he said, "and they never resort to common brawling."

"Just name-calling and back-biting."

"Be that as it may, what does the Institute for Extraterrestrialist Studies expect to accomplish in Paleozoic time?"

"Why, this strange prehistoric world offers something for any truly inquiring mind. Not long ago, in fact — that is, back home in the twenty-first century — I saw an interesting interview with a sociologist who was planning to come here. She made the comment that sociologists employ the same scientific methods that physicists, astronomers, and geologists do. 'We observe Brownian motion in our own ways.'"

"And your point is?"

"My point," Dr. Canepi said, with a mordant smirk, "is that just because you don't agree with somebody's theories doesn't mean you can dismiss their work as worthless."

"I think it depends on the theory. Racists have theories, terrorists have theories. Crackpots dote on theories."

"So do geniuses," Mrs. Canepi put in coolly, "and my husband is a genius."

Kevo grinned. "Maybe a mad genius." The grin went away. "Emphasis on mad."

"Ah," said Dr. Canepi. "Hah. Droll. Very droll."

Mrs. Canepi, however, seemed unamused. She told Kevo, "I shall be sure to mention your rudeness to that dear kind lady."

"What dear kind lady are you talking about?"

"I do not deal in wishful thinking," Dr. Canepi said, "but in truth. And the truth is, a great galactic civilization exists. Probably it is millions of years old. It may even be hundreds of millions of years old. It may have been old when life first appeared on Earth. It may even be responsible for the appearance of life on Earth."

"Which would make our world one big Petri dish. An ant farm, at best."

"Well, life on Earth may be an experiment, but I believe these beings are essentially beneficent. They shared basic technology with ancient people in various parts of the world. I believe it possible that the extraterrestrials

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may be keeping tabs on this planet even now, in the Paleozoic era, because they see it as a likely place for the rise of intelligent life."

"Uh huh. So, the question still is, What the hell brings you to Paleozoic time?"

Dr. Canepi laughed. "Why, on top of everything else, this is just the greatest adventure of my life! Back in — back home, I've never been off planet."

"What," Kevo said dryly, "never been taken for a ride in an alien spaceship?"

"Mock me if you will. During my career I've necessarily become inured to the sneers and supposed witticisms of the mundane-minded. Now could we please go have a look at the primordial scenery?"

"But of course. This way."

Kevo led the two visitors from the jump station to a catwalk beneath the edge of the helicopter deck. The Canepis crowded to the rail and found themselves gazing across an expanse of brown water at rocky, denuded-looking headlands and green-tinged tidal flats that stretched away indefinitely under a patchy overlying stratum of mist.

Dr. Canepi made a face and said, "What a smell!"

Behind him, Kevo said, "Well, this is what you asked to see — the primordial world in all its primordialness."

Dr. Canepi turned and said in a firm tone, "No, I came to see the radio telescope."

Kevo's expression became dubious. "Have you got clearance for that?"

Dr. Canepi fished a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it over. "We're entitled to everything on this list."

The guide grimaced as he examined the list. "One from column A, one from column B. Just how long do you plan to be here, anyway?"

"Oh, a few days."

"Only a few? Well, that's optimism for you. Scientists who spend a year here go back complaining they didn't have enough time, they barely scratched the surface. You are going to see everything there is to see in just a few days."

Canepi's smile broadened. "I know what I'm looking for. Anyway, it's our nickel. It's cost a fortune to get here, and not a penny of it came from

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the American taxpayer. I believe in what I'm about, and I'm willing to back it up with my own money."

Kevo grimaced again. "Writing flying-saucer books must pay better than I thought."

"How soon can we go ashore?"

"Well, let's just go and find out."

He did not offer to help the Canepis with their luggage. They followed him to the boat bay and wedged themselves aboard a crate-laden sort of barge minutes before lines were cast off and it began to make for shore. Mrs. Canepi looked askance at the pile of material stowed amidships. "I do believe," she said to her husband, "this must be the same stuff we had to wait in line behind back home."

"The jump station schedule hurries up for no man," said Kevo, "or woman."

"Since you have been appointed to escort us," Mrs. Canepi said, "I feel I'm perfectly within my rights to ask about your qualifications for the job. What do you do around here, when you aren't playing tour guide?"

Kevo's expression became rueful. "I used to write." He nodded as though to reassure himself as well as his charges that he had used to write. "And then I was drunk, and then I died." He grinned at his two charges, who only stared back at him, and then frowned and said, "F. Scott Fitzgerald," in the patent expectation of its meaning something to them. When it patently meant nothing, he said, "Don't they teach anything in school anymore?"

"As you were saying," Mrs. Canepi said smoothly. "First you were drunk, then you died."

"Oh. As I was saying. I went to work for one of the private corporations that came in. I'm a running-dog lackey of capitalists! But it's the only way I can stay here."

"What is there to stay for?"

"The scenery. The weather. The company. The stories! You want stories? Oh, the stories I've collected. They'd fill a book, if I felt like writing them down."

The Canepis looked around at the brown expanse of water, and Mrs. Canepi asked, "Do people scuba dive here?"

"Only when they have to."

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"My husband and I love diving. We go diving off Belize every year."

Dr. Canepi said, "I'd like to get into the water here, splash about, you know, in the primeval sea."

Kevo shook his head. "I wouldn't. The marine biologists tell me visibility's limited to just about the length of your arm. Their word's good enough for me. And you *don't* want to go bumping heads with a sea scorpion."

Dr. Canepi said, "I gather you've been here long enough to become friends with the scientists."

"Some."

"Do you believe everything they tell you?"

"Some."

"You take it on blind faith that they know what they're talking about?"

"Neither blind nor deaf. I'm a layman, I don't pretend to understand a tenth of what scientists say. I don't presume to understand the part I understand better than they do. Or even nearly as well. I know they're fallible human beings. I also know science is a self-correcting system. If the data say Jupiter has X number of moons and T. rex was an active predator, and then new data say Jupiter has Y number of moons and T. rex was a scavenger — well, science and scientists roll with the punch, so why shouldn't I?"

"What if," Canepi said, "the data suggest unequivocally that visitors from another planet raised human beings out of savagery and set them on the road to civilization?"

"Then I sure would want to know how you reached that conclusion when so many reputable scientists somehow managed to avoid it."

"Perhaps the answer is that most scientists are afraid to stake their reputations on radical reinterpretations of the data. There are real advantages to working outside the scientific mainstream."

"Doctor Canepi, something I do understand very well is words. A radical interpretation isn't the same thing as a persuasive one. I came away from the one book of yours I've read thinking you just don't know a whole lot about archeology, astronomy, or the price of beans."

As Kevo led the Canepis through the neatly laid-out camp to the tent assigned them, numerous civilians and even some Navy personnel greeted

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him by name. One or two asked about his charges, and he answered simply, "Sightseers." To the Canepis he said, "I'm skipping formal introductions because it's way too hot for fisticuffs." Although it was not yet midmorning, the warm air was gluey with humidity, and they streamed sweat as they walked. Dr. Canepi remained insistent about the radio telescope, however, and presently, after making inquiries, Kevo brought them to a dirty, battered open van parked at the edge of the camp. He said with a sardonic grin, "Your carriage awaits."

Mrs. Canepi said, "Quite a limousine."

"Don't make fun of a veteran," the guide told her with mock severity. "This vehicle participated in opposed landings with the U.S. Marines."

"Not during this century, I'm sure."

Kevo laughed, and Dr. Canepi offered his arm to his wife and said, "Come, my princess."

The only road in the world was steep, narrow, and unpaved. It had been blasted and bulldozed out of the great rocky slope behind the camp and described a series of long zigzags and sharp hairpin turns. The van lurched and jolted from rock to rut to pothole, slighting none in its way, for all the driver's efforts to keep the tires neatly between the parallel tracks of an earthmover that had gone up or come down earlier. With her entire being thus concentrated and Kevo unequal to the task of providing interesting commentary, the passengers were left to their own devices, which consisted chiefly in appreciating the view afforded by the starboard windows of the precipitous drop.

After a particularly thrilling lurch to starboard, Mrs. Canepi serenely remarked that the tracks put her in mind of the footprints of some gigantic beast, perhaps Behemoth itself.

Kevo decided not to let that pass. "You're anticipating developments by at least two hundred million years. There are no large terrestrial animals here, except for us humans. There are few enough terrestrial animals of any size here."

Mrs. Canepi gave Kevo a superior smile. "I was merely exercising poetic license."

Kevo essayed a superior smile of his own. "I *know* from poetic license."

The Canepis returned to absorption of the view. They could just make

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out the hazy opposite headland on the far edge of an estuarine expanse. At the bottom of the long slope lay the camp, and, beyond, the bay, brown and soupy with silt washed down from the interior highlands.

The van stopped at the top of the road, and the guide and his two charges stumbled forth, into the perfect sauna of the day, and stood plucking at the sweat-soaked fabric of their shirts. Then, suddenly unmindful of heat and humidity, Dr. Canepi darted forward, to the rim of a great gleaming concavity. Down in the bowl, two tiny human figures provided a sense of scale, albeit one skewed by the figures' mysteriously and disproportionately enormous feet. Other details began to register. Around the perimeter rose skeletal metal towers; cables strung from these supported a metal platform above the dish. Nearby was a rude hut of corrugated plastic; a woman with close-cropped gray hair stepped from within, and Kevo introduced her as Dr. Hayes, head of the astronomy team. He did not mention the Institute for Extraterrestrialist Studies, and she did not seem to recognize Canepi's name.

Gazing raptly into the bowl, Dr. Canepi said, "Your Doctor Gabbert was wrong. It's *beautiful*."

Hayes fairly beamed. "It's essentially a working scale model of the Arecibo observatory in Puerto Rico. We call ours Junior."

"Doctor Gabbert didn't — he called it a piece of junk. To hear him tell it, he was going to have to use Jansky's original equipment — a few wires on a wooden frame."

Hayes said, "You knew Gab?"

"Well, no. But I knew *of* him. He had a reputation for, ah — well, not to put too fine a point on it, but some people thought he was a royal pain in the rump."

"He was all of that and more. He was a perfectionist. He believed in doing things right."

"I've heard that people at the N.S.F. used to take early retirement rather than keep appointments with him. I could be wrong, but I think that was meant as a joke."

"I'm sure it was."

"So? Do you agree with him? Which do you think it's turned out to be, a telescope or a piece of junk?"

Hayes, clearly warming to her subject, said, "Frankly, Gab would

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never have been entirely happy with anything less than his own very long base array. He originally proposed a line of dishes stretching across Baltica and Laurentia way into darkest Gondwana. He got just this one. I agreed with him about some things. This isn't the site I'd have chosen, either. I'd have gone farther inland, much farther. However, there was a large natural depression here on the ridgeback itself, earth-movers merely had to improve on it, and these headlands do break up storm winds that might otherwise play hell. There's enough solid rock between here and the camp to cut out radio interference. Not that there's more than a small fraction of one percent of the radio traffic here than we have to cope with in the twenty-first century. The dish is actually better than what we were originally going to get. Early on, there was a counter-proposal for a transit instrument on a simple mount. It would have been cheaper to build, but it wouldn't have been able to track. It would've simply used the Earth's rotation to scan the sky. This was a compromise, really, and we still like to think it's a start. That steel platform supported by the cables strung from those towers holds the receiving equipment."

Mrs. Canepi asked, "What are those people doing down there?"

"Routine inspection. They wear special footgear to keep from damaging the dish. The dish itself is constructed of aluminum strips to let rainwater drain through. We get a lot of rain here. At Arecibo, local flora — ferns — were used to hold the ground together beneath the dish with their root systems. Here, now, root systems don't exist, soil barely exists, so we're having to make do with matting instead. The water's drained off and pumped out. There are plans for construction of another radio telescope in the southern hemisphere. That's still in the future. I don't think anyone's established a permanent camp in Gondwana yet. Not in the interior, anyway. But if it ever happens, with the two together we'll be able to map the entire Paleozoic sky."

Dr. Canepi grinned. "To say nothing of listening in at the waterhole."

"Um, well — "

Kevo said, "The what?"

He went unanswered. Dr. Canepi looked gratified to have the astronomer regard him with new interest. She said, "You know about the waterhole." It was not a question.

"Well, I don't," said Kevo, "so what is it?"

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"The waterhole," said the astronomer, "is what we call the long-wavelength region near the hydrogen line. It's bounded at one end by H, the hydrogen atom, which is the most common and fundamental atom of the universe. It emits a natural radio signal with a wavelength of twenty-one centimeters. At the other end is the hydroxyl radical, the O-H molecule. It emits a signal with a wavelength of eighteen centimeters. And H plus O-H makes H-two-O, water, of course. Ergo, the waterhole."

"I'm afraid I still don't understand."

Hayes started to reply, but Dr. Canepi rushed in, "The thinking is that the hydrogen line is so obvious that any extraterrestrial civilization beaming signals to possible neighbors will use it." He smirked at Kevo. "And I'm sure you thought this expedition was just about trilobites and things like that!"

Kevo gave Hayes a dubious look. "Pam, do you actually expect to hear from an extraterrestrial civilization here in Paleozoic time? I mean, seriously?"

Hayes shook her head. "No more or less seriously than I'd expect to hear from one in Cenozoic time. I never said — "

"The Tau Cetians," said Dr. Canepi, "or the Polarians or whoever they are may have got a four-hundred-million-year jump on us, for all we know. And are you going to be sending out your own signals as well?"

Hayes shook her head again. "Sending signals is way low on our list of priorities. Even lower than listening for them."

Dr. Canepi frowned. "Why not? There's that old saying about what you're looking for, you tend to find."

"Except when it comes to extraterrestrial civilizations. Thus far, SETI hasn't got so much as a howdy-do from beyond. And here, the geoscientists can haul back trilobites by the ton, but any sort of paleo-SETI project faces even worse odds than back home."

"Still," Dr. Canepi said, "I *came* here because I believe the human race should avail itself of *every* opportunity to beam radio signals at the stars. Back in the twenty-first century, the shell of signals expanding outward from the Earth has a diameter of not much more than a hundred light-years. My idea is that if we were to beam signals from this settlement in the Paleozoic era, they would have expanded *four hundred million* light-years outward by the twenty-first century. They would reach any

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technologically advanced civilization located anywhere within that immense sphere, and then all extraterrestrial radio astronomers would have to do is determine the point of origin."

Hayes regarded him very solemnly for some few seconds, and then, when she looked at Kevo, he gave every appearance of trying not very hard to smother mirth. A red flush crept up her neck and across her cheeks, and she said, "Some goddamn practical joke!" To Dr. Canepi she said, "I don't have *time* for lunatics who watch too many sci-fi shows!" She turned and stalked into the hut and closed the door.

Kevo's mirth had vaporized in the heat of the astronomer's accusation. He glared hard at Dr. Canepi, who seemed bewildered and deflated. Yet he managed to flash a defiant glance in the direction of the astronomer's hut. "Still," he said, "listening for signals might be worth a shot. Hope springs eternally."

Kevo rolled his eyes. "Infernally, you mean. Come on, let's get back on the bus. I'm not welcome here anymore, big thanks to you."

Dr. Canepi opened his mouth, then closed it as the guide jabbed a finger in his direction.

"You know, Doctor," he said, "every time I think I know just exactly how goddamn stupid and crazy some people can be, they go and prove I've wildly underestimated them."

On the way back down, Dr. Canepi sat slumped in his seat, staring out across the mudflats; his wife sat with her hands clasped in her lap and stared through Kevo. As the van lurched to a stop at the bottom of the road, where the camp lay cocooned in heat and silence, Kevo declared that as far as he was concerned he had discharged his official duties for the day and the Canepis could just fend for themselves until the following morning.

The Canepis plodded miserably to their tent. Mrs. Canepi said something about their peeling off sodden garments and using the communal showers, but her husband only sat slumped on a camp chair. With a resigned air, she sat next to him. The sky quickly darkened. Mrs. Canepi mopped her long, narrow face with a handkerchief and said, "I feel like I'm about to melt." Her husband did not look at her and did not say anything.

Then, from somewhere not too far away, came a masculine voice raised inexpertly but enthusiastically in song:

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"By the light
of the silv'ry moon
I want to spoon —
to my honey
I'll croon love's tune!"

"Hazarding a guess," Mrs. Canepi said, "that is our guide, and he has skinful."

Their guide appeared out of the dusk and came to an unsteady halt before them. He held up something in his hand and said, "Care to indulge?"

Dr. Canepi made a disconsolate sound but continued to stare at the ground; Mrs. Canepi said that she was allergic to alcohol.

"Well, then," said Kevo. "She-who-must-be-obeyed says I'm to escort you to the mess tent."

"I believe we'll forego dinner," said Mrs. Canepi. "My husband is not feeling well."

Kevo peered at Dr. Canepi. "No, madam, what your husband is," he said, "is *sulking*."

"This is outrageous," said Mrs. Canepi, but she did not seem especially outraged; she sounded tired and washed-out and as though she were protesting merely for form's sake.

"You know something," Kevo said, "your husband reminds me of me — when I was twelve years old. That's how old I was when I found a big tooth on a beach. It was maybe the size of my thumb, and I was absolutely convinced at the time that it was from a shark, or maybe even a whale. My dad merely glanced at it, then told me, No, son, it's a horse's tooth, or a cow's, or maybe a pig's. But I had my heart set on some immense and ferocious creature of the deep. I held on to the idea that it was a shark's tooth for as long as I could. I argued and argued about it. Finally, Dad showed me pictures of real shark and whale teeth, and forced me to admit, Okay, it's a horse's tooth. All the yearning and fervent belief in the world couldn't change it into something more interesting than a horse tooth. For the sake of dramatic closure, I wish I could say I traded the thing to another kid for something better, a real shark's tooth, perhaps, or a fossil. But I'm pretty sure I just tossed it out in the trash one day when my mother made me clean up my room."

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After a moment, Mrs. Canepi turned her head just enough to make eye contact with the guide. "That was a kind of closure."

He shrugged. "Shall we go in to dinner?"

"Will you give us a moment, please?"

"Of course." Kevo managed to turn himself around without falling and lurched away into the gloom. Presently they heard him singing again

> "Honey moon,
> keep a-shinin' in June!
> Your silv'ry beams
> will bring love's dreams —
> we'll be cuddlin' soon
> by the silv'ry moon!"

Mrs. Canepi placed a hand on her husband's arm. "Dear?"

His lips trembled as he said, "It's a — such a *bitter* thing to be a scientific maverick. There are times when the examples of Galileo and Wegener are — almost not enough to sustain me."

"You mustn't lose heart, dear. Galileo and Wegener were eventually vindicated."

"It's the eventual part that's so disheartening. What does eventual vindication avail me *now*? I've spent my life and my fortune in the pursuit of an unpopular truth. And what have I got to show for it? Unpopularity and a reputation for untruthfulness in the scientific community as if I were a — flat-earther, creationist, animal psychic!"

"What is the regard of deluded so-called scientists," Mrs. Canepi asked, "compared to the reward the star people will give you? You've kept faith with them, and they'll keep faith with you. One day they'll take us away from our backward planet."

At that, Dr. Canepi mustered sufficient dignity to sit up straight and meet his wife's gaze. He raised her hand to his lips. "You always give me strength," he told her gratefully, "and hope."

"Because I believe in you, dear."

He stood and said, "Come, my princess," and offered her his arm, and she took it.

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Just in case you know Ms. Hand only by the perceptive book reviews she contributes to our pages, let us make note that she is the author of several novels, including Winterlong, Waking the Moon, Black Light, *and* Mortal Love. *She's currently working on her eighth novel,* Generation Loss. *Her short fiction has been published in* Sci Fiction, Conjunctions, *and elsewhere. "Echo" is her first story to appear in our pages since "Last Summer at Mars Hill" in the August 1994 issue. It's part of a sequence of thematically linked stories that draw on ancient Greek texts.*

Echo

By Elizabeth Hand

THIS IS NOT THE FIRST TIME this has happened. I've been here every time it has. Always I learn about it the same way, a message from someone five hundred miles away, a thousand, comes flickering across my screen. There's no TV here on the island, and the radio reception is spotty: the signal comes across Penobscot Bay from a tower atop Mars Hill, and any kind of weather — thunderstorms, high winds, blizzards — brings the tower down. Sometimes I'm listening to the radio when it happens, music playing, Nick Drake, a promo for the Common Ground Country Fair; then a sudden soft explosive hiss like damp hay falling onto a bonfire. Then silence.

Sometimes I hear about it from you. Or, well, I don't actually hear anything: I read your messages, imagine your voice, for a moment neither sardonic nor world-weary, just exhausted, too fraught to be expressive. Words like feathers falling from the sky, black specks on blue.

The Space Needle. Sears Tower. LaGuardia Airport. Golden Gate Bridge. The Millennium Eye. The Bahrain Hilton. Sydney, Singapore, Jerusalem.

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Years apart at first; then months; now years again. How long has it been since the first tower fell? When did I last hear from you?

I can't remember.

This morning I took the dog for a walk across the island. We often go in search of birds, me for my work, the wolfhound to chase for joy. He ran across the ridge, rushing at a partridge that burst into the air in a roar of copper feathers and beech leaves. The dog dashed after her fruitlessly, long jaw open to show red gums, white teeth, a panting unfurled tongue.

"Finn!" I called and he circled round the fern brake, snapping at bracken and crickets, black splinters that leapt wildly from his jaws. "Finn, get back here."

He came. Mine is the only voice he knows now.

There was a while when I worried about things like food and water, whether I might need to get to a doctor. But the dug well is good. I'd put up enough dried beans and canned goods to last for years, and the garden does well these days. The warming means longer summers here on the island, more sun; I can grow tomatoes now, and basil, scotch bonnet peppers, plants that I never could grow when I first arrived. The root cellar under the cottage is dry enough and cool enough that I keep all my medications there, things I stockpiled back when I could get over to Ellsworth and the mainland — albuterol inhalers, alprazolam, amoxicillin, Tylenol and codeine, ibuprofen, aspirin; cases of food for the wolfhound. When I first put the solar cells up, visitors shook their heads: not enough sunny days this far north, not enough light. But that changed too as the days got warmer.

Now it's the wireless signal that's difficult to capture, not sunlight. There will be months on end of silence and then it will flare up again, for days or even weeks, I never know when. If I'm lucky, I patch into it, then sit there, waiting, holding my breath until the messages begin to scroll across the screen, looking for your name. I go downstairs to my office every day, like an angler going to shore, casting my line though I know the weather's wrong, the currents too strong, not enough wind or too much, the power grid like the Grand Banks scraped barren by decades of trawlers dragging the bottom. Sometimes my line would latch onto you:

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sometimes, in the middle of the night, it would be the middle of the night where you were, too, and we'd write back and forth. I used to joke about these letters going out like messages in bottles, not knowing if they would reach you, or where you'd be when they did.

London, Paris, Petra, Oahu, Moscow. You were always too far away. Now you're like everyone else, unimaginably distant. Who would ever have thought it could all be gone, just like that? The last time I saw you was in the hotel in Toronto, we looked out and saw the spire of the CN Tower like Cupid's arrow aimed at us. You stood by the window and the sun was behind you and you looked like a cornstalk I'd seen once, burning, your gray hair turned to gold and your face smoke.

I can't see you again, you said. *Deirdre is sick and I need to be with her.*

I didn't believe you. We made plans to meet in Montreal, in Halifax, Seattle. Gray places; after Deirdre's treatment ended. After she got better.

But that didn't happen. Nobody got better. Everything got worse.

In the first days I would climb to the highest point on the island, a granite dome ringed by tamaracks and hemlock, the gray stone covered with lichen, celadon, bone-white, brilliant orange: as though armfuls of dried flowers had been tossed from an airplane high overhead. When evening came the aurora borealis would streak the sky, crimson, emerald, amber; as though the sun were rising in the west, in the middle of the night, rising for hours on end. I lay on my back wrapped in an old Pendleton blanket and watched, the dog Finn stretched out alongside me. One night the spectral display continued into dawn, falling arrows of green and scarlet, silver threads like rain or sheet lightning racing through them. The air hummed, I pulled up the sleeve of my flannel shirt and watched as the hairs on my arm rose and remained erect; looked down at the dog, awake now, growling steadily as it stared at the trees edging the granite, its hair on end like a cat's. There was nothing in the woods, nothing in the sky above us. After perhaps thirty minutes I heard a muffled sound to the west, like a far-off sonic boom; nothing more.

After Toronto we spoke only once a year; you would make your annual pilgrimage to mutual friends in Paris and call me from there. It was a joke, that we could only speak like this.

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I'm never closer to you than when I'm in the seventh arrondissement at the Bowlses', you said.

But even before then we'd seldom talked on the phone. You said it would destroy the purity of our correspondence, and refused to give me your number in Seattle. We had never seen that much of each other anyway, a handful of times over the decades. Glasgow once, San Francisco, a long weekend in Liverpool, another in New York. Everything was in the letters; only of course they weren't actual letters but bits of information, code, electrical sparks; like neurotransmitters leaping the chasm between synapses. When I dreamed of you, I dreamed of your name shining in the middle of a computer screen like a ripple in still water. Even in dreams I couldn't touch you: my fingers would hover above your face and you'd fragment into jots of gray and black and silver. When you were in Basra I didn't hear from you for months. Afterward you said you were glad; that my silence had been like a gift.

FOR A WHILE, the first four or five years, I would go down to where I kept the dinghy moored on the shingle at Amonsic Cove. It had a little two-horsepower engine that I kept filled with gasoline, in case I ever needed to get to the mainland.

But the tides are tricky here, they race high and treacherously fast in the Reach; the Ellsworth American used to run stories every year about lobstermen who went out after a snagged line and never came up, or people from away who misjudged the time to come back from their picnic on Egg Island, and never made it back. Then one day I went down to check on the dinghy and found the engine gone. I walked the length of the beach two days running at low tide, searching for it, went out as far as I could on foot, hopping between rocks and tidal pools and startling the cormorants where they sat on high boulders, wings held out to dry like black angels in the thin sunlight. I never found the motor. A year after that the dinghy came loose in a storm and was lost as well, though for months I recognized bits of its weathered red planking when they washed up onshore.

The book I was working on last time was a translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The manuscript remains on my desk beside my computer,

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with my notes on the nymph "whose tongue did not still when others spoke," the girl cursed by Hera to fall in love with beautiful, brutal Narkissos. He hears her pleading voice in the woods and calls to her, mistaking her for his friends.

But it is the nymph who emerges from the forest. And when he sees her Narkissos strikes her, repulsed; then flees. *Emoriar quam sit tibi copia nostri!* he cries; and with those words condemns himself.

Better to die than be possessed by you.

And see, here is Narkissos dead beside the woodland pool, his hand trailing in the water as he gazes at his own reflection. Of the nymph,

> *She is vanished, save for these:*
> *her bones and a voice that calls out*
> *amongst the trees.*
> *Her bones are scattered in the rocks.*
> *She moves now in the laurels and beeches, she moves unseen*
> *across the mountaintops.*
> *You will hear her in the mountains and wild places,*
> *but nothing of her remains save her voice,*
> *her voice alone, alone upon the mountaintop.*

Several months ago, midsummer, I began to print out your letters. I was afraid something would happen to the computer and I would lose them forever. It took a week, working off and on. The printer uses a lot of power and the island had become locked in by fog; the rows of solar cells, for the first time, failed to give me enough light to read by during the endless gray days, let alone run the computer and printer for more than fifteen minutes at a stretch. Still, I managed, and at the end of a week held a sheaf of pages. Hundreds of them, maybe more; they made a larger stack than the piles of notes for Ovid.

I love the purity of our relationship, you wrote from Singapore. *Trust me, it's better this way. You'll have me forever!*

There were poems, quotes from Cavafy, Sappho, Robert Lowell, W. S. Merwin. *It's hard for me to admit this, but the sad truth is that the more intimate we become here, the less likely it is we'll ever meet again in real life.* Some of the letters had my responses copied at the

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beginning or end, imploring, fractious; lines from other poems, songs.

Swept with confused alarms of
I long and seek after
You can't put your arms around a memory.

THE FIRST TIME, air traffic stopped. That was the eeriest thing, eerier than the absence of lights when I stood upon the granite dome and looked westward to the mainland. I was used to the slow constant flow overhead, planes taking the Great Circle Route between New York, Boston, London, Stockholm, passing above the islands, Labrador, Greenland, gray space, white. Now, day after day after day the sky was empty. The tower on Mars Hill fell silent. The dog and I would crisscross the island, me throwing sticks for him to chase across the rocky shingle, the wolfhound racing after them and returning tirelessly, over and over.

After a week the planes returned. The sound of the first one was like an explosion after that silence, but others followed, and soon enough I grew accustomed to them again. Until once more they stopped.

I wonder sometimes, How do I know this is all truly happening? Your letters come to me, blue sparks channeled through sunlight; you and your words are more real to me than anything else. Yet how real is that? How real is all of this? When I lie upon the granite I can feel stone pressing down against my skull, the trajectory of satellites across the sky above me a slow steady pulse in time with the firing of chemical signals in my head. It's the only thing I hear, now: it has been a year at least since the tower at Mars Hill went dead, seemingly for good.

One afternoon, a long time ago now, the wolfhound began barking frantically and I looked out to see a skiff making its way across the water. I went down to meet it: Rick Osgood, the part-time constable and volunteer fire chief from Mars Hill.

"We hadn't seen you for a while," he called. He drew the skiff up to the dock but didn't get out. "Wanted to make sure you were okay."

I told him I was, asked him up for coffee but he said no. "Just checking, that's all. Making a round of the islands to make sure everyone's okay."

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He asked after the children. I told him they'd gone to stay with their father. I stood waving, as he turned the skiff around and it churned back out across the dark water, a spume of black smoke trailing it. I have seen no one since.

Three weeks ago I turned on the computer and, for the first time in months, was able to patch into a signal and search for you. The news from outside was scattered and all bad. Pictures, mostly; they seem to have lost the urge for language, or perhaps it is just easier this way, with so many people so far apart. *Some things take us to a place where words have no meaning.* I was readying myself for bed when suddenly there was a spurt of sound from the monitor. I turned and saw the screen filled with strings of words. Your name: they were all messages from you. I sat down elated and trembling, waiting as for a quarter-hour they cascaded from the sky and moved beneath my fingertips, silver and black and gray and blue. I thought that at last you had found me; that these were years of words and yearning, that you would be back. Then, as abruptly as it had begun, the stream ceased; and I began to read.

They were not new letters; they were all your old ones, decades old, some of them. 2009, 2007, 2004, 2001, 1999, 1998, 1997, 1996. I scrolled backward in time, a skein of years, words; your name popping up again and again like a bright bead upon a string. I read them all, I read them until my eyes ached and the floor was pooled with candle wax and broken light bulbs. When morning came I tried to tap into the signal again but it was gone. I go outside each night and stare at the sky, straining my eyes as I look for some sign that something moves up there, that there is something between myself and the stars. But the satellites too are gone now, and it has been years upon years since I have heard an airplane.

In fall and winter I watch those birds that do not migrate. Chickadees, nuthatches, ravens, kinglets. This last autumn I took Finn down to the deep place where in another century they quarried granite to build the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine. The quarry is filled with water, still and black and bone-cold. We saw a flock of wild turkeys, young ones; but the dog is so old now he can no longer chase them, only watch as I set my snares. I walked to the water's edge and gazed into the dark pool, saw my

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reflected face but there is no change upon it, nothing to show how many years have passed for me here, alone. I have burned all the old crates and cartons from the root cellar, though it is not empty yet. I burn for kindling the leavings from my wood bench, the hoops that did not curve properly after soaking in willow-water, the broken dowels and circlets. Only the wolfhound's grizzled muzzle tells me how long it's been since I've seen a human face. When I dream of you now I see a smooth stretch of water with only a few red leaves upon its surface.

We returned from the cottage, and the old dog fell asleep in the late afternoon sun. I sat outside and watched as a downy woodpecker, *Picus pubesens,* crept up one of the red oaks, poking beneath its soft bark for insects. They are friendly birds, easy to entice, sociable; unlike the solitary wrynecks they somewhat resemble. The wrynecks do not climb trees but scratch upon the ground for the ants they love to eat. "Its body is almost bent backward," Thomas Bewick wrote over two hundred years ago in his *History of British Birds,*

> whilst it writhes its head and neck by a slow and almost involuntary motion, not unlike the waving wreaths of a serpent. It is a very solitary bird, never being seen with any other society but that of its female, and this is only transitory, for as soon as the domestic union is dissolved, which is in the month of September, they retire and migrate separately.

It was this strange involuntary motion, perhaps, that so fascinated the ancient Greeks. In Pindar's fourth Pythian Ode, Aphrodite gives the wryneck to Jason as the magical means to seduce Medea, and with it he binds the princess to him through her obsessive love. Aphrodite of many arrows: she bears the brown-and-white bird to him, "the bird of madness," its wings and legs nailed to a four-spoked wheel.

> *And she shared with Jason*
> *the means by which a spell might blaze*
> *and burn Medea, burning away all love she had for her family*
> *a fire that would ignite her mind, already aflame*
> *so that all her passion turned to him alone.*

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The same bird was used by the nymph Simaitha, abandoned by her lover in Theokritos's Idyll: pinned to the wooden wheel, the feathered spokes spin above a fire as the nymph invokes Hecate. The isle is full of voices: they are all mine.

Yesterday the wolfhound died, collapsing as he followed me to the top of the granite dome. He did not get up again, and I sat beside him, stroking his long gray muzzle as his dark eyes stared into mine and, at last, closed. I wept then as I didn't weep all those times when terrible news came, and held his great body until it grew cold and stiff between my arms. It was a struggle to lift and carry him, but I did, stumbling across the lichen-rough floor to the shadow of the thin birches and tamaracks overlooking the Reach. I buried him there with the others, and afterward lit a fire.

This is not the first time this has happened. There is an endless history of forgotten empires, men gifted by a goddess who bears arrows, things in flight that fall in flames. Always, somewhere, a woman waits alone for news. At night I climb to the highest point of the island. There I make a little fire and burn things that I find on the beach and in the woods. Leaves, bark, small bones, clumps of feathers, a book. Sometimes I think of you and stand upon the rock and shout as the wind comes at me, cold and smelling of snow. A name, over and over and over again.

Farewell, Narkissos said, and again Echo sighed and whispered Farewell.

Good-bye, good-bye.

Can you still hear me?

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Boatman's Holiday

By Jeffrey Ford

BENEATH A BLAZING ORANGE sun, he maneuvered his boat between the two petrified oaks that grew so high their tops were lost in violet clouds. The vast trunks and complexity of branches were bone white, as if hidden just below the surface of the murky water was a stag's head the size of a mountain. Thousands of crows, like black leaves, perched amidst the pale tangle, staring silently down. Feathers fell, spiraling in their descent with the slow grace of certain dreams, and he wondered how many of these journeys he'd made or if they were all, always, the same journey.

Beyond the oaks, the current grew stronger, and he entered a constantly shifting maze of whirlpools, some spinning clockwise, some counter, as if to negate the passage of time. Another boatman might have given in to panic and lost everything, but he was a master navigator and knew the river better than himself. Any other craft would have quickly succumbed to the seething waters, been ripped apart and its debris swallowed.

His boat was comprised of an inner structure of human bone lashed

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together with tendon and covered in flesh stitched by his own steady hand, employing a thorn needle and thread spun from sorrow. The lines of its contours lacked symmetry, meandered and went off on tangents. Along each side, worked into the gunwales well above the waterline, was a row of eyeless, tongueless faces — the empty sockets, the gaping lips, portals through which the craft breathed. Below, in the hold, there reverberated a heartbeat that fluttered randomly and died every minute only to be revived the next.

On deck, there were two long rows of benches fashioned from skulls for his passengers, and at the back, his seat at the tiller. In the shallows, he'd stand and use his long pole to guide the boat along. There was no need of a sail as the vessel moved slowly forward of its own volition with a simple command. On the trip out, the benches empty, he'd whisper, "There!" and on the journey back, carrying a full load, "Home!" and no river current could dissuade its progress. Still, it took a sure and fearless hand to hold the craft on course.

Charon's tall, wiry frame was slightly but irreparably bent from centuries hunched beside the tiller. His beard and tangled nest of snow-white hair, his complexion the color of ash, made him appear ancient. When in the throes of maneuvering around Felmian, the blue serpent, or in the heated rush along the shoals of the Island of Nothing, however, he'd toss one side of his scarlet cloak back over his shoulder, and the musculature of his chest, the coiled bulge of his bicep, the thick tendon in his forearm, gave evidence of the power hidden beneath his laconic façade. Woe to the passenger who mistook those outer signs of age for weakness and set some plan in motion, for then the boatman would wield his long shallows stick and shatter every bone in their body.

Each treacherous obstacle, the clutch of shifting boulders, the rapids, the waterfall that dropped into a bottomless star-filled space, was expertly avoided with a skill born of intuition. Eventually a vague but steady tone like the uninterrupted buzz of a mosquito came to him over the water, a sign that he drew close to his destination. He shaded his eyes against the brightness of the flaming sun and spotted the dark, thin edge of shoreline in the distance. As he advanced, that distant, whispered note grew steadily into a high keening, and then fractured to reveal itself a chorus of agony. A few more leagues and he could make out the legion of forms crowding

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the bank. When close enough to land, he left the tiller, stood, and used the pole to turn the boat so it came to rest sideways on the black sand. Laying down the pole, he stepped to his spot at the prow.

Two winged, toad-faced demons with talons for hands and hands for feet, Gesnil and Trinkthil, saw to the orderliness of the line of passengers that ran from the shore back a hundred yards into the writhing human continent of dead. Every day there were more travelers, and no matter how many trips Charon made, there was no hope of ever emptying the endless beach.

Brandishing a cat-o-nine-tails with barbed tips fashioned from incisors, the demons lashed the "tourists," as they called them, subduing those unwilling to go.

"Another load of the falsely accused, Charon," said Gesnil, puffing on a lit human finger jutting from the corner of his mouth.

"Watch this woman, third back, in the blue dress," said Trinkthil, "her blithering lamentations will bore you to sleep. You know, she never really meant to add Belladonna to the recipe for her husband's gruel."

Charon shook his head.

"We've gotten word that there will be no voyages for a time," said Gesnil.

"Yes," said Charon, "I've been granted a respite by the Master. A holiday."

"A century's passed already?" said Gesnil. "My, my, it seemed no more than three. Time flies...."

"Traveling?" asked Trinkthil. "Or staying home?"

"There's an island I believe I'll visit," he said.

"Where's it located?" asked Gesnil.

Charon ignored the question and said, "Send them along."

The demons knew to obey, and they directed the first in line to move forward. A bald, overweight man in a cassock, some member of the clergy, stepped up. He was trembling so that his jowls shook. He'd waited on the shore in dire fear and anguish for centuries, milling about, fretting as to the ultimate nature of his fate.

"Payment," said Charon.

The man tilted his head back and opened his mouth. A round shiny object lay beneath his tongue. The boatman reached out and took the gold

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coin, putting it in the pocket of his cloak. "Next," called Charon as the man moved past him and took a seat on the bench of skulls.

HELL'S ORANGE SUN screamed in its death throes every evening, a pandemonium sweeping down from above that made even the demons sweat and set the master's three-headed dog to cowering. That horrendous din worked its way into the rocks, the river, the petrified trees, and everything brimmed with misery. Slowly, it diminished as the starless, moonless dark came on, devouring every last shred of light. With that infernal night came a cool breeze whose initial tantalizing relief never failed to deceive the damned, though they be residents for a thousand years, with a false promise of Hope. That growing wind carried in it a catalyst for memory, and set all who it caressed to recalling in vivid detail their lost lives — a torture individually tailored, more effective than fire.

Charon sat in his home, the skull of a fallen god, on the crest of a high flint hill, overlooking the river. Through the left eye socket glazed with transparent lies, he could be seen sitting at a table, a glutton's-fat tallow burning, its flame guttering in the night breeze let in through the gap of a missing tooth. Laid out before him was a curling width of tattooed flesh skinned from the back of an ancient explorer who'd no doubt sold his soul for a sip from the Fountain of Youth. In the boatman's right hand was a compass and in his left a writing quill. His gaze traced along the strange parchment the course of his own river, Acheron, the River of Pain, to where it crossed paths with Pyriphlegethon, the River of Fire. That burning course was eventually quelled in cataracts of steam where it emptied into and became the Lethe, River of Forgetting.

He traced his next day's journey with the quill tip, gliding it an inch above the meandering line of vein blue. There, in the meager width of that last river's depiction, almost directly halfway between its origin and end in the mournful Cocytus, was a freckle. Anyone else would have thought it no more than a bodily blemish inked over by chance in the production of the map, but Charon was certain after centuries of overhearing whispered snatches of conversation from his unlucky passengers that it represented the legendary island of Oondeshai.

He put down his quill and compass and sat back in the chair, closing

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his eyes. Hanging from the center of the cathedral cranium above, the wind chime made of dangling bat bones clacked as the mischievous breeze that invaded his home lifted one corner of the map. He sighed at the touch of cool wind as its insidious effect reeled his memory into the past.

One night, he couldn't recall how many centuries before, he was lying in bed on the verge of sleep, when there came a pounding at the hinged door carved in the left side of the skull. "Who's there?" he called in the fearsome voice he used to silence passengers. There was no verbal answer, but another barrage of banging ensued. He rolled out of bed, put on his cloak and lit a tallow. Taking the candle with him, he went to the door and flung it open. A startled figure stepped back into the darkness. Charon thrust the light forward and beheld a cowed, trembling man, his naked flesh covered in oozing sores and wounds.

"Who are you?" asked the boatman.

The man stared up at him, holding out a hand.

"You've escaped from the pit, haven't you?"

The back side of the flint hill atop which his home sat overlooked the enormous pit, its circumference at the top a hundred miles across. Spiraling along its inner wall was a path that led down and down in ever decreasing arcs through the various levels of Hell to end at a pinpoint in the very mind of the Master. Even at night, if Charon were to go behind the skull and peer out over the rim, he could see a faint reddish glow and hear the distant echo of plaintive wails.

The man finally nodded.

"Come in," said Charon, and held the door as the stranger shuffled past him.

Later, after he'd been offered a chair, a spare cloak, and a cup of nettle tea, his broken visitor began to come around.

"You know," said Charon, "there's no escape from Hell."

"This I know," mumbled the man, making a great effort to speak, as if he'd forgotten the skill. "But there is an escape in Hell."

"What are you talking about? The dog will be here within the hour to fetch you back. He's less than gentle."

"I need to make the river," said the man.

"What's your name?" asked Charon.

"Wieroot," said the man with a grimace.

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The boatman nodded. "This escape in Hell, where is it, what is it?"

"Oondeshai," said Wieroot, "an island in the River Lethe."

"Where did you hear of it?"

"I created it," he said, holding his head with both hands as if to remember. "Centuries ago, I wrote it into the fabric of the mythology of Hell."

"Mythology?" asked Charon. "I suppose those wounds on your body are merely a myth?"

"The suffering's real here, don't I know it, but the entire construction of Hell is, of course, man's own invention. The Pit, the three-headed dog, the rivers, you, if I may say so, all sprang from the mind of humanity, confabulated to punish itself."

"Hell has been here from the beginning," said Charon.

"Yes," said Wieroot, "in one form or another. But when, in the living world, something is added to the legend, some detail to better convince believers or convert new ones, here it leaps into existence with a ready-made history that instantly spreads back to the start and a guaranteed future that creeps inexorably forward." The escapee fell into a fit of coughing, smoke from the fires of the pit issuing in small clouds from his lungs.

"The heat's made you mad," said Charon. "You've had too much time to think."

"Both may be true," croaked Wieroot, wincing in pain, "but listen for a moment more. You appear to be a man, yet I'll wager you don't remember your youth. Where were you born? How did you become the boatman?"

Charon strained his memory, searching for an image of his past in the world of the living. All he saw was rows and rows of heads, tilting back, proffering the coin beneath the tongue. An image of him setting out across the river, passing between the giant oaks, repeated behind his eyes three dozen times in rapid succession.

"Nothing there, am I correct?"

Charon stared hard at his guest.

"I was a cleric, and in copying a sacred text describing the environs of Hell, I deviated from the disintegrating original and added the existence of Oondeshai. Over the course of years, decades, centuries, other scholars

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found my creation and added it to their own works and so, now, Oondeshai, though not as well known as yourself or your river, is an actuality in this desperate land."

From down along the riverbank came the approaching sound of Cerberus baying. Wieroot stood, sloughing off the cloak to let it drop into his chair. "I've got to get to the river," he said. "But consider this. You live in the skull of a fallen god. This space was once filled with a substance that directed the universe, no, was the universe. How does a god die?"

"You'll never get across," said Charon.

"I don't want to. I want to be caught in its flow."

"You'll drown."

"Yes, I'll drown, be bitten by the spiny eels, burned in the River of Fire, but I won't die, for I'm already dead. Some time ages hence, my body will wash up on the shore of Oondeshai, and I will have arrived home. The way I crafted the island, the moment you reach its shores and pull yourself from the River of Forgetting, you instantly remember everything."

"It sounds like a child's tale," Charon murmured.

"Thank you," said the stranger.

"What gave you cause to create this island?" asked the boatman.

Wieroot staggered toward the door. As he opened it and stepped out into the pitch black, he called back, "I knew I would eventually commit murder."

Charon followed out into the night and heard the man's feet pacing away down the flint hill toward the river. Seconds later, he heard the wheezing breath of the three-headed dog. Growling, barking, sounded in triplicate. There was silence for a time, and then finally...a splash, and in that moment, for the merest instant, an image of a beautiful island flashed behind the boatman's eyes.

He'd nearly been able to forget the incident with Wieroot as the centuries flowed on, their own River of Pain, until one day he heard one of his passengers whisper the word "Oondeshai" to another. Three or four times this happened, and then, only a half century past, a young woman, still radiant though dead, with shiny black hair and a curious red dot of a birthmark just below her left eye, was ushered onto his boat. He requested payment. When she tilted her head back, opened her mouth and lifted her tongue, there was no coin but instead a small, tightly folded package of

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flesh. Charon nearly lost his temper as he retrieved it from her mouth, but she whispered quickly, "A map to Oondeshai."

These words were like a slap to his face. He froze for the merest instant, but then thought quickly, and, nodding, stepped aside for her to take a seat. "Next," he yelled and the demons were none the wiser. Later that night, he unfolded the crudely cut rectangle of skin, and after a close inspection of the tattoo cursed himself for having been duped. He swept the map onto the floor and the night breeze blew it into a corner. Weeks later, after finding it had been blown back out from under the table into the middle of the floor, he lifted it and searched it again. This time he noticed the freckle in the length of Lethe's blue line and wondered.

HE KEPT HIS BOAT in a small lagoon hidden by a thicket of black poplars. It was just after sunrise, and he'd already stowed his provisions in the hold below deck. After lashing them fast with lengths of hangman's rope cast off over the years by certain passengers, he turned around to face the chaotically beating heart of the craft. The large blood organ, having once resided in the chest of the Queen of Sirens, was suspended in the center of the hold by thick branch-like veins and arteries that grew into the sides of the boat. Its vasculature expanded and contracted, and the heart itself beat erratically, undulating and shivering, sweating red droplets.

Charon waited until after it died, lay still, and then was startled back to life by whatever immortal force pervaded it chambers. Once it was moving again, he gave a high-pitched whistle, a note that began at the bottom of the register and quickly rose to the top. At the sound of this signal, the wet red meat of the thing parted in a slit to reveal an eye. The orb swiveled to and fro, and the boatman stepped up close with a burning tallow in one hand and the map, opened, in the other. He back-lit the scrap of skin to let the eye read its tattoo. He'd circled the freckle that represented Oondeshai with his quill, so the destination was clearly marked. All he'd have to do is steer around the dangers, keep the keel in deep water and stay awake. Otherwise, the craft now knew the way to go.

Up on deck, he cast off the ropes, and instead of uttering the word "There," he spoke a command used less than once a century — "Away."

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The boat moved out of the lagoon and onto the river. Charon felt something close to joy at not having to steer between the giant white oaks. He glanced up to his left at the top of the flint hill and saw the huge skull, staring down at him. The day was hot and orange and all of Hell was busy at the work of suffering, but he, the boatman, was off on a holiday.

On the voyage out, he traveled with the flow of the river, so its current combined with the inherent, enchanted propulsion of the boat made for swift passage. There were the usual whirlpools, outcroppings of sulfur and brimstone to avoid, but these occasional obstacles were a welcome diversion. He'd never taken this route before when on holiday. Usually, he'd just stay home, resting, making minor repairs to the boat, playing knucklebones with some of the bat-winged demons from the pit on a brief break from the grueling work of torture.

Once, as a guest of the master during a holiday, he'd been invited into the bottommost reaches of the pit, transported in a winged chariot that glided down through the center of the great spiral. There, where the Czar of the Underworld kept a private palace made of frozen sighs, in a land of snow so cold one's breath fractured upon touching the air, he was led by an army of living marble statues, shaped like men but devoid of faces, down a tunnel that led to an enormous circle of clear ice. Through this transparent barrier he could look out on the realm of the living. Six days he spent transfixed between astonishment and fear at the sight of the world the way it was. That vacation left a splinter of ice in his heart that took three centuries to melt.

None of his previous getaways ever resulted in a tenth the sense of relief he already felt having gone but a few miles along the nautical route to Oondeshai. He repeated the name of the island again and again under his breath as he worked the tiller or manned the shallows pole, hoping to catch another glimpse of its image as he had the night Wieroot dove into the Acheron. As always, that mental picture refused to coalesce, but he'd learned to suffice with its absence, which had become a kind of solace in itself.

To avoid dangerous eddies and rocks in the middle flow of the river, Charon was occasionally forced to steer the boat in close to shore on the port side. There, he glimpsed the marvels of that remote, forgotten landscape — a distant string of smoldering volcanoes; a thundering herd

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of bloodless behemoths, sweeping like a white wave across the immensity of a fissured salt flat; a glittering forest of crystal trees alive with long-tailed monkeys made of lead. The distractions were many, but he struggled to put away his curiosity and concentrate for fear of running aground and ripping a hole in the hull.

He hoped to make the River of Fire before nightfall, so as to have light with which to navigate. To travel the Acheron blind would be sheer suicide, and unlike Wieroot, Charon was uncertain as to whether he was already dead or alive or merely a figment of Hell's imagination. There was the possibility of finding a natural harbor and dropping the anchor, but the land through which the river ran had shown him fierce and mysterious creatures stalking him along the banks and that made steering through the dark seem the fairer alternative.

As the day waned, and the sun began to whine with the pain of its gradual death, Charon peered ahead with a hand shading his sight in anticipation of a glimpse at the flames of Pyriphlegethon. During his visit to the palace of frozen sighs, the master had let slip that the liquid fire of those waters burned only sinners. Because the boat was a tool of Hell, made of Hell, he was fairly certain it could withstand the flames, but he wasn't sure if at some point in his distant past he had not sinned. If he were to blunder into suffering, though, he thought that he at least would learn some truth about himself.

In the last moments of light, he lit three candles and positioned them at the prow of the boat. They proved ineffectual against the night, casting their glow only a shallow pole-length ahead of the craft. Their glare wearied Charon's eyes and he grew fatigued. To distract himself from fatigue, he went below and brought back a dried, salted Harpy leg to chew on. In recent centuries the winged creatures had grown scrawny, almost thin enough to slip his snares. The meat was known to improve eyesight and exacerbate the mind. Its effect had nothing to do with clarity, merely a kind of agitation of thought that was, at this juncture, preferable to slumber. Sleep was the special benefit of the working class of Hell, and the boatman usually relished it. Dreams especially were an exotic escape from the routine of work. The sinners never slept, nor did the master.

Precisely at the center of the night Charon felt some urge, some pull of intuition to push the tiller hard to the left. As soon as he'd made the

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reckless maneuver, he heard from up ahead the loud gulping sound that meant a whirlpool lay in his path. The sound grew quickly to a deafening strength, and only when he was upon the swirling monster, riding its very lip around the right arc, was he able to see its immensity. The boat struggled to free itself from the draw, and instead of being propelled by its magic it seemed to be clawing its way forward, dragging its weight free of the hopeless descent. There was nothing he could do but hold the tiller firm and stare with widened eyes down the long, treacherous tunnel. Not a moment passed after he was finally free of it than the boat entered the turbulent waters where Acheron crossed the River of Fire.

He released his grip on the tiller and let the craft lead him with its knowledge of the map he'd shown it. His fingers gripped tightly into the eye holes of two of the skulls that formed his seat, and he held on so as not to be thrown overboard. Pyriphlegethon now blazed ahead of him, and the sight of its dancing flames, some flaring high into the night, made him scream, not with fear but exhilaration. The boat forged forward, cleaved the burning surface, and then was engulfed in a yellow-orange brightness that gave no heat. The frantic illumination dazed Charon, and he sat as in a trance, dreaming wide awake. He no longer felt the passage of Time, the urgency to reach his destination, the weight of all those things he'd fled on his holiday.

Eventually, after a prolonged bright trance, the blazing waters became turbulent, lost their fire, and a thick mist rose off them. That mist quickly became a fog so thick it seemed to have texture, brushing against his skin like a feather. He thought he might grab handfuls until it slipped through his fingers, leaked into his nostrils, and wrapped its tentacles around his memory.

When the boatman awoke to the daily birth cry of Hell's sun, he found himself lying naked upon his bed, staring up at the clutch of bat bones dangling from the cranial center of his skull home. He was startled at first, grasping awkwardly for a tiller that wasn't there, tightening his fist around the shaft of the absent shallows stick that instead rested at an angle against the doorway. As soon as the shock of discovery that he was home had abated, he sighed deeply and sat up on the edge of the bed. It struck him then that his entire journey, his holiday, had been for naught.

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He frantically searched his thoughts for the slightest shred of a memory that he might have reached Oondeshai, but every trace had been forgotten. For the first time in centuries, tears came to his eyes, and the frustration of his predicament made him cry out. Eventually, he stood and found his cloak rolled into a ball on the floor at the foot of his bed. He dressed and without stopping to put on his boots or grab the shallows pole, he left his home.

With determination in his stride, he mounted the small rise that lay back behind the skull and stood at the rim of the enormous pit. Inching to the very edge, he peered down into the spiraled depths at the faint red glow. The screams of tortured sinners, the wailing laments of self-pity, sounded in his ears like distant voices in a dream. Beneath it all he could barely discern, like the buzzing of a fly, the sound of the master laughing uproariously, joyously, and that discordant strain seemed to lace itself subtly into everything.

Charon's anger and frustration slowly melted into a kind of numbness as cold as the hallways of Satan's palace, and he swayed to and fro, out over the edge and back, not so much wanting to jump as waiting to fall. Time passed, he was not aware how much, and then as suddenly as he had dressed and left his home, he turned away from the pit.

Once more inside the skull, he prepared to go to work. There was a great heaviness within him, as if his very organs were now made of lead, and each step was an effort, each exhalation a sigh. He found his eelskin ankle boots beneath the table at which he'd studied the flesh map at night. Upon lifting one, it turned in his hand, and a steady stream of blonde sand poured out onto the floor. The sight of it caught him off guard and for a moment he stopped breathing.

He fell to his knees to inspect the little pile that had formed. Carefully, he lifted the other boot, turned it over and emptied that one into its own neat little pile next to the other. He reached toward these twin wonders, initially wanting to feel the grains run through his fingers, but their stark proof that he had been to Oondeshai and could not recall a moment of it ultimately defeated his will and he never touched them. Instead, he stood, took up the shallows pole, and left the skull for his boat.

As he guided the boat between the two giant oaks, he no longer wondered if all his journeys across the Acheron were always the same

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journey. With a dull aspect, he performed his duties as the boatman. His muscles, educated in the task over countless centuries, knew exactly how to avoid the blue serpent and skirt the whirlpools without need of a single thought. No doubt it was these same unconscious processes that had brought Charon and his craft back safely from Oondeshai.

Gesnil and Trinkthil inquired with great anticipation about his vacation when he met them on the far shore. For the demons, who knew no respite from the drudgery of herding sinners, even a few words about a holiday away would have been like some rare confection, but he told them nothing. From the look on Charon's face, they knew not to prod him and merely sent the travelers forward to offer coins and take their places on the benches.

During the return trip that morning, a large fellow sitting among the passengers had a last-second attack of nerves in the face of an impending eternity of suffering. He screamed incoherently, and Charon ordered him to silence. When the man stood up and began pacing back and forth, the boatman ordered him to return to his seat. The man persisted moving about, his body jerking with spasms of fear, and it was obvious his antics were spooking the other sinners. Fearing the man would spread mutiny, Charon came forth with the shallows stick and bringing it around like a club, split the poor fellow's head. That was usually all the incentive a recalcitrant passenger needed to return to the bench, but this one was now insane with the horror of his plight.

The boatman waded in and beat him wildly, striking him again and again. With each blow, Charon felt some infinitesimal measure of relief from his own frustration. When he was finished, the agitator lay in a heap on deck, nothing more than a flesh bag full of broken bones, and the other passengers shuffled their feet sideways so as not to touch his corpse.

Only later, after he had docked his boat in the lagoon and the winged demons had flown out of the pit to lead the damned up the flint hill and down along the spiral path to their eternal destinies, did the boatman regret his rage. As he lifted the sac of flesh that had been his charge and dumped it like a bale of chum over the side, he realized that the man's hysteria had been one and the same thing as his own frustration.

The sun sounded its death cry as it sank into a pool of blood that was the horizon and then Hell's twilight came on. Charon dragged himself up

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the hill and went inside his home. Before pure night closed its fist on the riverbank, he kicked off his boots, gnawed on a haunch of Harpy flesh, and lit the tallow that sat in its holder on the table. Taking his seat there he stared into the flame, thinking of it as the future that constantly drew him forward through years, decades, centuries, eons, as the past disappeared behind him. "I am nothing but a moment," he said aloud and his words echoed around the empty skull.

Some time later, still sitting at his chair at the table, he noticed the candle flame twitch. His eyes shifted for the first time in hours to follow its movement. Then the fire began to dance, the sheets of flesh parchment lifted slightly at their corners, the bat bones clacked quietly overhead. Hell's deceptive wind of memory had begun to blow. He heard it whistling in through the space in his home's grin, felt its coolness sweep around him. This most complex and exquisite torture that brought back to sinners the times of their lives now worked on the boatman. He moved his bare feet beneath the table and realized the piles of sand lay beneath them.

The image began in his mind no more than a dot of blue and then rapidly unfolded in every direction to reveal a sky and crystal water. The sun there in Oondeshai had been yellow and it gave true warmth. This he remembered clearly. He'd sat high on a hill of blond sand, staring out across the endless vista of sparkling water. Next to him on the left was Wieroot, legs crossed, dressed in a black robe and sporting a beard to hide the healing scars that riddled his face. On the right was the young woman with the shining black hair and the red dot of a birthmark beneath her left eye.

"...And you created this all by writing it in the other world?" asked Charon. There was a breeze blowing and the boatman felt a certain lightness inside as if he'd eaten of one of the white clouds floating across the sky.

"I'll tell you a secret," said Wieroot, "although it's a shame you'll never get a chance to put it to use."

"Tell me," said the boatman.

"God made the world with words," he said in a whisper.

Charon remembered that he didn't understand. He furrowed his brow and turned to look at the young woman to see if she was laughing. Instead

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she was also nodding along with Wieroot. She put her hand on the boatman's shoulder and said, "And man made God with words."

Charon's memory of the beach on Oondeshai suddenly gave violent birth to another memory from his holiday. He was sitting in a small structure with no door, facing out into a night scene of tall trees whose leaves were blowing in a strong wind. Although it was night, it was not the utter darkness he knew from his quadrant of Hell. High in the black sky there shone a bright disk, which cast its beams down onto the island. Their glow had seeped into the small home behind him and fell upon the forms of Wieroot and the woman, Shara was her name, where they slept upon a bed of reeds. Beneath the sound of the wind, the calls of night birds, the whirr of insects, he heard the steady breathing of the sleeping couple.

And one last memory followed. Charon recalled Wieroot drawing near to him as he was about to board his boat for the return journey.

"You told me you committed murder," said the boatman.

"I did," said Wieroot.

"Who?"

"The god whose skull you live in," came the words which grew faint and then disappeared as the night wind of Hell ceased blowing. The memories faded and Charon looked up to see the candle flame again at rest. He reached across the table and drew his writing quill and a sheaf of parchment toward him. Dipping the pen nib into the pot of blood that was his ink, he scratched out two words at the top of the page. My Story, he wrote, and then set about remembering the future. The words came, slowly at first, reluctantly, dragging their imagery behind them, but after a short while their numbers grew to equal the number of sinners awaiting a journey to the distant shore. He ferried them methodically, expertly, from his mind to the page, scratching away long into the dark night of Hell until down at the bottom of the spiral pit, in his palace of frozen sighs, Satan suddenly stopped laughing.

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SCIENCE

PAUL DOHERTY & PAT MURPHY

GLIMPSING TITAN

FOR MORE than a hundred years, those of us in the speculative fiction business have been speculating like mad about Titan, Saturn's largest moon. Back in 1894, in *Journey in Other Worlds*, John Jacob Astor wrote of a group of travelers whose spacecraft crossed the orbit of Titan on its way to Saturn. (On Saturn, the travelers wore their winter clothes, as it was rather cold.) Over the passing years, science fiction authors have written of Titan as a mining colony (Arthur C. Clarke's *Imperial Earth*, Alan E. Nourse's *Trouble on Titan*) and as a source of aliens (Philip K. Dick's *The Game-Players of Titan*). These days, authors seem more inclined to consider the possibilities of life on Saturn's largest moon (Stephen Baxter's *Titan* and Michael Swanwick's Hugo Award-winning novelette "Slow Life.")

Titan is the only moon known to have a thick atmosphere. That atmosphere is hazy and hides the surface from the view of Earth observers. From a science fiction writer's point of view, that's just great. Nothing fuels speculation like something you can't see!

But the surface of Titan is growing less and less mysterious — and more and more intriguing. In 2004, the *Cassini-Huygens* spacecraft went into orbit around Saturn, providing us with information direct from Saturn's moon. Science began to catch up with science fiction.

Launched in 1997, *Cassini-Huygens* took a circuitous route to Saturn, looping around the Sun twice. It gained momentum as it passed close by Venus once in 1998 and again in 1999. It gained more momentum as it passed by Earth in 1999 and Jupiter in 2000. In each close-encounter with a planet, or "flyby," the spacecraft got a push that sped it on its way to Saturn. (If you want to know how a spacecraft

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gains momentum from a flyby, check out our 1998 column "Close Encounters of the Gravitational Kind" *(http://www.sfsite.com/fsf/1998/pmpd9812.htm).*)

In July 2004, *Cassini-Huygens* swung into orbit around Saturn, where it will remain for the next four years (barring alien intervention or other mishap). During this time, the spacecraft will complete seventy-five orbits of Saturn, forty-four close encounters with Titan, and numerous close encounters with Saturn's other moons. Equipped with infrared and radar "eyes," *Cassini* can see the surface of Titan through the moon's hazy atmosphere. In early 2005, the *Huygens* probe actually penetrated the haze and made a safe parachute landing onto the surface.

Each time *Cassini* passes by Titan, its instruments reveal a small portion of the moon's surface. This episodic series of glimpses is a bit like the old science fiction serials, where each installment left you hungry for more.

To help you appreciate this strange world, Paul and Pat would like to take you on a journey that begins on Earth and proceeds into and through the atmosphere of Titan to the surface of the moon. Along the way, we'll share some of the hands-on explorations Paul developed for Exploratorium webcasts about Titan.

Doing the Math

Christian Huygens discovered Titan in 1655. Viewed with human eyes, Titan is a smoggy orange blur, a bit like Los Angeles seen from an airplane on a bad day.

As moons go, Titan is huge. Misled by its smoggy atmosphere, Earth observers originally thought that it was the largest moon in the solar system. But after scientists subtracted the 200 km (120 mile)-thick atmosphere, it dropped into second place behind Jupiter's moon Ganymede. That still leaves Titan bigger than the planet Mercury, and only slightly smaller than Mars.

When the *Voyager* spacecraft passed by Titan, observations of how much the moon's gravity deflected the spacecraft allowed scientists to calculate Titan's mass (an estimate that will be refined based on information from the *Cassini* spacecraft's multiple encounters with the moon). Titan has 1/44 the mass of Earth. But its diameter is forty percent that of Earth — and therefore it has 1/16 the volume of the Earth. Do that math and you'll discover that Titan has a density of

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about 1/3 that of Earth.

The Earth has a rocky mantle and crust wrapped around an iron core. Scientists think that Titan has a dirty water ice mantle and crust over a rocky core. Since ice is less dense than rock, that would explain the discrepancy in mass.

The combination of the mass and radius of Titan means that the acceleration of gravity on the surface of Titan is 1/7 of the acceleration of gravity at the surface of the Earth. On Titan, your weight (measured with a spring scale) would be 1/7 your weight on Earth.

How Cold Is It?

Titan is ten times farther from the sun than the Earth is. According to the good old inverse square law (which predicts how light spreads out from a point source with distance), the sunlight that reaches Titan is 100 times dimmer than sunlight on Earth. Titan's thick smog blocks some of that sunlight, preventing it from reaching the moon's surface. As a result, Titan's surface is about 1000 times dimmer than a sunny day on Earth. That's about as bright as an average household living room at night with incandescent lighting.

Without sunlight to warm it up, Titan is cold! How cold? Well, cold enough that a winter coat just wouldn't cut it, no matter what John Jacob Astor says. The temperature is just over 94 kelvins at the surface. (That's −180° C or −290° F.) For those of you who have seen demonstrations with liquid nitrogen, the temperature of the liquid nitrogen on Earth is 77 kelvins, slightly colder than Titan. If Titan were much colder, the nitrogen of the atmosphere would turn into a liquid nitrogen ocean.

The effects of cold temperatures on Titan can be modeled using liquid nitrogen.

Paul likes to use a hot dog to simulate human flesh on Titan. If you put a hot dog into liquid nitrogen, then hit the hot dog with a hammer, it shatters. Of course Paul does this by surreptitiously slipping the hot dog into the index finger of a rubber glove, and then putting his fingers into the rest of the glove with his index finger folded against his palm. After warning the audience about the dangers of liquid nitrogen, he puts the hot-dog-finger into the liquid nitrogen. Then he removes the glove from the liquid and shatters the hot-dog-finger with a hammer. (Paul's performances are not for people with heart trouble!)

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About that Smog

Titan's smoggy atmosphere is mostly nitrogen (a distinction Titan shares with Earth.) Nitrogen is a dull gas — it's not very reactive. It's the impurities in the atmospheres of Earth and Titan that make things exciting.

In Earth's atmosphere, the major impurity is oxygen, which makes up twenty-one percent of the dry atmosphere. Oxygen defines an exciting gas. Combine it with fuel and a spark and you get fire. Living things use it to generate energy.

The second major impurity on Earth is water vapor, which makes up less than three percent of the atmosphere. Water at Earth temperatures can exist as a gas, a liquid, or a solid, forming clouds, rain, snow, oceans, and glaciers. As you probably remember from your elementary school science textbook, water evaporates from oceans, then forms clouds and falls as rain, which flows back into the ocean (carving the land as it goes). This is known as the water cycle.

Titan's version of the water cycle might be called the "methane cycle." On Titan the major impurity is methane or natural gas (CH_4 to a chemist). Methane makes up about six percent of Titan's atmosphere. At the temperatures common on Titan, methane can liquefy, falling as rain and running over the moon's surface to create rivers and seas.

The methane also accounts for Titan's smog. Los Angeles and Titan have photochemical smog for similar reasons. Both have sources of hydrocarbons. In Los Angeles, the source is car exhaust. On Titan, it's methane in the atmosphere. Both Los Angeles and Titan are irradiated by ultraviolet radiation from sunlight. On Titan, the ultraviolet light breaks apart the methane. The fragments of methane recombine to form heavier hydrocarbons. Liquid drops and solid particles of these hydrocarbons make up the smog.

Spacecraft have identified a number of gaseous hydrocarbons on Titan, including ethane, butane, and acetylene. On Titan's surface, scientists expect to find tholin, a hydrocarbon that can be made in the lab by subjecting mixtures of methane, ammonia, and water vapor to simulated lightning discharges. At Titan's temperatures, tholin will be a waxy solid, probably impure and dark in color. They postulate that methane rain washes tholin from the atmosphere onto the moon's surface where it colors

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the icy surface dark. The dark tholin accumulates at the bottoms of valleys and depressions and contributes to the darkness of river channels in the *Huygens* images.

There is so much atmosphere on Titan that the surface pressure is one point five times the surface pressure on Earth. That's the pressure you would experience on Earth at the bottom of the deep end of a swimming pool, fifteen feet down. The high pressure plus the cold temperature makes the air on Titan about five times denser than the atmosphere of Earth.

To simulate Titan's atmosphere at the Exploratorium, Paul fills a balloon with sulfur hexafluoride gas. This dense gas gives the balloon five times the density of the Earth's atmosphere. When you wave the dense balloon around, it feels quite strange as the inertia of the dense gas makes the balloon feel almost as if it is full of a liquid. The atmosphere of Titan is dense enough that it would really slow you down if you tried to run.

For another demonstration, Paul uses a clear plastic butane lighter. You can see the liquid butane inside the lighter. When the lighter releases this flammable hydrocarbon into the atmosphere, the butane becomes a gas. Supply a spark and the butane gas ignites and burns in the presence of oxygen. To make a lighter on Titan, you would need to fill the lighter with oxygen. Release the oxygen gas into the atmosphere of Titan and provide a spark. With the oxygen, methane in the atmosphere would burn as a flame.

Wet T-shirt Contests and *Cassini*

Human eyes can't see through the smoggy haze that covers Titan's surface. That's because our eyes detect visible light, a very narrow range of wavelengths in the spectrum of electromagnetic radiation. Titan's smog blocks visible light. But there are other forms of electromagnetic radiation that penetrate the smog. The *Cassini* spacecraft has eyes that detect infrared light. Some wavelengths of infrared light pass through Titan's atmosphere as if it were clear.

In the comfort of your own home, using a few technological toys in ways that their manufacturers did not intend, you can do an experiment that lets you examine things that are transparent and opaque in the infrared.

Remote controls for televisions and other audio and video devices

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emit pulses of infrared light from an infrared light-emitting diode. Most digital cameras are sensitive to infrared light. Have a friend point the end of the remote control that you normally point at the television toward your digital camera while you look at the monitor screen of the camera. When your friend presses a button on the remote control, you'll notice a light flashing on the monitor screen of the camera. But if you look directly at the remote control, you won't see anything. The camera can see infrared light, but your eyes can't.

Some things that are opaque to visible light are transparent in the infrared. Find a thin dark plastic trash bag. You can't see much through it. But look at the TV remote control inside such a bag with a digital camera held outside the bag and you can see its infrared light easily. The trash bag material is transparent to infrared light and opaque to visible light, just like the atmosphere of Titan.

If your digital camera doesn't detect infrared from the remote, there's a reason for that. Thin white cotton — like the cotton of a T-shirt — is also transparent to some wavelengths of infrared. When the infrared viewing capabilities of digital cameras were first discovered, some people realized that cameras could see right through a thin cotton T-shirt. Sales of these cameras boomed (for the same reason that wet T-shirt contests are popular). Camera manufacturers added infrared filters to block out most of the infrared. (Sony, in particular, now has infrared blocking filters on most of their video cameras.)

The infrared cameras on the *Cassini* spacecraft, unfettered by privacy concerns, can see through Titan's smog, revealing dark regions and light regions. Scientists still don't know exactly what the dark and light areas mean. The dark regions look like oceans or lunar mare. They appear to lap up against white coastlines. Light islands protrude from the dark mare. But, like mare on the moon, which were once molten lava but are now solid rock, the dark regions of Titan may be solid. We'll have to wait to find out exactly what these dark regions of Titan really are. In the meantime, there's plenty of room for speculation.

What We Don't See

In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "Silver Blaze," Sherlock Holmes comments on the "the curious incident of the dog in the

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ight time." What was curious bout the dog's activity was the bsence of activity. When a race-orse was stolen, the stable dog ever barked.

Scientists, like Sherlock Iolmes, must always be aware of /hat isn't there. The most interest-ng features on the surface of Titan re the features that are not there. t's notable that Titan has few vis-ble craters. (Just one large crater as been seen on Titan during a lyby in February 2005.) This is in-eresting since craters are found on very old solid surface in the solar ystem. The lack of craters on Ti-an (like the lack of craters on the olcanically active moon Io and on he Earth) means that the surface of Titan is young on a geologic imescale. Something removes cra-ers on Titan. Some hints of the rocesses that remove craters can e gleaned from the images taken y the *Huygens* probe that para-huted under the clouds of Titan nd returned clear photographs of ome of the surface. We'll pause for moment to discuss these photos, nd then return to a discussion of he missing craters.

Geologists like to get "ground ruth," to go along with their im-ges. They like to touch surfaces, reak open rocks, and analyze them to find out what they are made of. To get ground truth on Titan, NASA teamed up with ESA, the European Space Agency, to drop the *Huygens* spacecraft onto the surface of Titan. Suspended from parachutes, the *Huygens* probe took a couple of hours to drift leisurely down through the thick atmosphere of Titan. It took pictures all the way down. These pictures showed something not often seen on other worlds — patterns that looked like dark rivers cut into a lighter landscape.

The surface of Titan seems to be made of water ice. Scientists think that the patterns that look like river channels are carved by flowing methane. Some channels have the pattern of rivers carved by raindrops falling from the sky, like the patterns you can see from an airplane flying over the southwestern desert of the United States. Others have a shorter branching pattern like what you see at the seashore when a wave washes up onto the sand and wets the sand. When the water drains out of the sand, short branching patterns are formed in a process known as "sapping." On Titan, scientists think that these shorter patterns are made by methane springs.

And what about the missing craters? Erosion of the surface by

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rainfall or sapping will remove craters from the landscape.

The *Huygens* probe's camera also showed molten material leaking from linear cracks on Titan. You can think of this material as lava, like the lava that flows from the linear East Rift Zone in Hawaii. On Titan, however, the lava is a mixture of water and ammonia, which is hot compared to its surroundings.

To understand the surface of Titan, it helps to think of water ice as a mineral and liquid water as molten ice. The ice on Titan is not pure ice. It's dirty ice, made of water mixed with silicates and ammonia. The heat leaking from Titan's interior melts this dirty ice, and the resulting "lava" flows out of volcanic vents and cracks on the surface of Titan. The softening of the surface by melting and the flow of molten ice also helps erase craters from the surface of Titan.

Landing on Titan

The *Huygens* probe drifted down on its parachute and settled onto the dark surface of a Titan mare. A rod sticking out below the base of the probe poked into the surface. This rod hit a thin stiff crust first. Once through the crust, it entered a substance with the texture of "wet sand." However, the "sand" on Titan is probably crushed water ice while the "wet" is liquid methane. The lander had a gas chromatograph/mass spectrometer on board, a device that's rather like a mechanical "nose." As the hot (compared to 94 Kelvin) lander sank into the crushed wet ice, it "smelled" methane gas vaporized by the heat of the lander itself. So we know that there is liquid methane just beneath the dark flat surface on which the *Huygens* probe landed.

During his webcast, Paul modeled the surface of Titan by pouring cooking oil onto crushed ice. He kept the level of the oil below the top of the ice. When this mixture was placed into the freezer a crust formed on top of the oily crushed ice. The oil on Earth played the role of the liquid methane on Titan.

The cameras on the lander looked out and saw rounded boulders, seemingly shaped by flowing fluids. These boulders were made from water ice. At the cold temperatures of Titan, water ice is as hard as granite is on Earth.

We're used to experiencing water ice from the freezer where it has a hardness of one point five on the Mohs scale, the geologist's hardness scale that runs from one for talc to

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ten for diamond. Water ice at 0° C is harder than talc but softer than gypsum at Mohs two. But as ice gets colder, it gets harder. By the time ice reaches –70°C, it has hardness six on the Mohs scale. That's as hard as the mineral feldspar, which is a major component of granite. The landscapes of Titan are made from water ice that's as hard as granite. The landscape is carved by rivers of liquid methane laden with crushed ice sediment.

A Different Perspective

When methane flows on Titan, it erodes and shapes the surface, creating features that look remarkably like Earth landscapes. Take a quick glance at some of the images snapped by the *Huygens* probe on its way to Titan's surface and you might think you were looking at a river valley on Earth. A series of streams branch from a major river system and the land has obviously been shaped by flowing liquid. But the liquid, in this case, is methane.

In a way, this makes Titan a perfect science fiction metaphor. The surface looks familiar but is, in fact, completely different. And that is, after all, one of the things science fiction does best — finding strangeness in the familiar, and familiarity in the strange.

The Exploratorium is San Francisco's museum of science, art, and human perception — where science and science fiction meet. Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty both work there. To learn more about Pat Murphy's science fiction writing, visit her web site at *www.brazenhussies.net/murphy*. For more on Paul Doherty's work and his latest adventures, visit *www.exo.net/~pauld*. If you want to see Paul's webcasts and the Exploratorium web site about the Cassini-Huygens Mission (which won the Scientific American award as best astronomy site of 2004), go to *www.exploratorium.edu/saturn*.

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In Slovenia, the bestseller list is mostly nonfiction, but two novels have hit the list recently: The Da Vinci Code *and a timeless fantasy (first published in 1968) by the name of* The Last Unicorn.

It might have taken three and a half decades for Schmendrick and Molly Grue to reach Slovenia, but it has taken Mr. Beagle even longer to return to these characters and to the world he created. Now that he has done so, he promises more: this story (which first appeared in a limited edition by Conlan Press) will serve as the bridge to a new novel Mr. Beagle plans to finish next year. For updates on the progress of this novel, plus news about Summerlong *and other books in the works, sign up for Peter Beagle's newsletter at* www.peterbeagle.com.

Two quick words of thanks must preface this story. One is for Connor F. Cochran, whose work with Mr. Beagle is producing wonders. The other is for the staff of the Blimpie's sandwich in Jersey City near the courthouse. It was greatly appreciated that none of you commented on the fact that the juror on lunch break last fall, sitting in the corner reading a manuscript, was quietly crying tears of joy.

Two Hearts

By Peter S. Beagle

MY BROTHER WILFRID KEEPS saying it's not fair that it should all have happened to me. Me being a girl, and a baby, and too stupid to lace up my own sandals properly. But *I* think it's fair. I think everything happened exactly the way it should have done. Except for the sad parts, and maybe those too.

I'm Sooz, and I am nine years old. Ten next month, on the anniversary of the day the griffin came. Wilfrid says it was because of me, that the griffin heard that the ugliest baby in the world had just been born, and it was going to eat me, but I was *too* ugly, even for a griffin. So it nested in the Midwood (we call it that, but its real name is the Midnight Wood, because of the darkness under the trees), and stayed to eat our sheep and our goats. Griffins do that if they like a place.

But it didn't ever eat children, not until this year.

I only saw it once — I mean, once *before* — rising up above the trees one night, like a second moon. Only there wasn't a moon, then. There was nothing in the whole world but the griffin, golden feathers all blazing on its lion's body and eagle's wings, with its great front claws like teeth, and

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that monstrous beak that looked so huge for its head....Wilfrid says I screamed for three days, but he's lying, and I *didn't* hide in the root cellar like he says either, I slept in the barn those two nights, with our dog Malka. Because I knew Malka wouldn't let anything get me.

I mean my parents wouldn't have, either, not if they could have stopped it. It's just that Malka is the biggest, fiercest dog in the whole village, and she's not afraid of anything. And after the griffin took Jehane, the blacksmith's little girl, you couldn't help seeing how frightened my father was, running back and forth with the other men, trying to organize some sort of patrol, so people could always tell when the griffin was coming. I know he was frightened for me and my mother, and doing everything he could to protect us, but it didn't make me feel any safer, and Malka did.

But nobody knew what to do, anyway. Not my father, nobody. It was bad enough when the griffin was only taking the sheep, because almost everyone here sells wool or cheese or sheepskin things to make a living. But once it took Jehane, early last spring, that changed everything. We sent messengers to the king — three of them — and each time the king sent someone back to us with them. The first time, it was one knight, all by himself. His name was Douros, and he gave me an apple. He rode away into the Midwood, singing, to look for the griffin, and we never saw him again.

The second time — after the griffin took Louli, the boy who worked for the miller — the king sent five knights together. One of them did come back, but he died before he could tell anyone what happened.

The third time an entire squadron came. That's what my father said, anyway. I don't know how many soldiers there are in a squadron, but it was a lot, and they were all over the village for two days, pitching their tents everywhere, stabling their horses in every barn, and boasting in the tavern how they'd soon take care of that griffin for us poor peasants. They had musicians playing when they marched into the Midwood — I remember that, and I remember when the music stopped, and the sounds we heard afterward.

After that, the village didn't send to the king anymore. We didn't want more of his men to die, and besides they weren't any help. So from then on all the children were hurried indoors when the sun went down, and the

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griffin woke from its day's rest to hunt again. We couldn't play together, or run errands or watch the flocks for our parents, or even sleep near open windows, for fear of the griffin. There was nothing for me to do but read books I already knew by heart, and complain to my mother and father, who were too tired from watching after Wilfrid and me to bother with us. They were guarding the other children too, turn and turn about with the other families — *and* our sheep, *and* our goats — so they were always tired, as well as frightened, and we were all angry with each other most of the time. It was the same for everybody.

And then the griffin took Felicitas.

Felicitas couldn't talk, but she was my best friend, always, since we were little. I always understood what she wanted to say, and she understood me, better than anyone, and we played in a special way that I won't ever play with anyone else. Her family thought she was a waste of food, because no boy would marry a dumb girl, so they let her eat with us most of the time. Wilfrid used to make fun of the whispery quack that was the one sound she could make, but I hit him with a rock, and after that he didn't do it anymore.

I didn't see it happen, but I still see it in my head. She *knew* not to go out, but she was always just so happy coming to us in the evening. And nobody at her house would have noticed her being gone. None of them ever noticed Felicitas.

The day I learned Felicitas was gone, that was the day I set off to see the king myself.

Well, the same *night*, actually — because there wasn't any chance of getting away from my house or the village in daylight. I don't know what I'd have done, really, except that my Uncle Ambrose was carting a load of sheepskins to market in Hagsgate, and you have to start long before sunup to be there by the time the market opens. Uncle Ambrose is my best uncle, but I knew I couldn't ask him to take me to the king — he'd have gone straight to my mother instead, and told her to give me sulphur and molasses and put me to bed with a mustard plaster. He gives his *horse* sulfur and molasses, even.

So I went to bed early that night, and I waited until everyone was asleep. I wanted to leave a note on my pillow, but I kept writing things and then tearing the notes up and throwing them in the fireplace, and I was

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afraid of somebody waking, or Uncle Ambrose leaving without me. Finally I just wrote, *I will come home soon.* I didn't take any clothes with me, or anything else, except a bit of cheese, because I thought the king must live somewhere near Hagsgate, which is the only big town I've ever seen. My mother and father were snoring in their room, but Wilfrid had fallen asleep right in front of the hearth, and they always leave him there when he does. If you rouse him to go to his own bed, he comes up fighting and crying. I don't know why.

I stood and looked down at him for the longest time. Wilfrid doesn't look nearly so mean when he's sleeping. My mother had banked the coals to make sure there'd be a fire for tomorrow's bread, and my father's moleskin trews were hanging there to dry, because he'd had to wade into the stockpond that afternoon to rescue a lamb. I moved them a little bit, so they wouldn't burn. I wound the clock — Wilfrid's supposed to do that every night, but he always forgets — and I thought how they'd all be hearing it ticking in the morning while they were looking everywhere for me, too frightened to eat any breakfast, and I turned to go back to my room.

But then I turned around again, and I climbed out of the kitchen window, because our front door squeaks so. I was afraid that Malka might wake in the barn and right away know I was up to something, because I can't ever fool Malka, only she didn't, and then I held my breath almost the whole way as I ran to Uncle Ambrose's house and scrambled right into his cart with the sheepskins. It was a cold night, but under that pile of sheepskins it was hot and nasty-smelling, and there wasn't anything to do but lie still and wait for Uncle Ambrose. So I mostly thought about Felicitas, to keep from feeling so bad about leaving home and everyone. That was bad enough — I never really *lost* anybody close before, not *forever* — but anyway it was different.

I don't know when Uncle Ambrose finally came, because I dozed off in the cart, and didn't wake until there was this jolt and a rattle and the sort of floppy grumble a horse makes when *he's* been waked up and doesn't like it — and we were off for Hagsgate. The half-moon was setting early, but I could see the village bumping by, not looking silvery in the light, but small and dull, no color to anything. And all the same I almost began to cry, because it already seemed so far away, though we hadn't even

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passed the stockpond yet, and I felt as though I'd never see it again. I would have climbed back out of the cart right then, if I hadn't known better.

Because the griffin was still up and hunting. I couldn't see it, of course, under the sheepskins (and I had my eyes shut, anyway), but its wings made a sound like a lot of knives being sharpened all together, and sometimes it gave a cry that was dreadful because it was so soft and gentle, and even a little sad and *scared*, as though it were imitating the sound Felicitas might have made when it took her. I burrowed deep down as I could, and tried to sleep again, but I couldn't.

Which was just as well, because I didn't want to ride all the way into Hagsgate, where Uncle Ambrose was bound to find me when he unloaded his sheepskins in the marketplace. So when I didn't hear the griffin anymore (they won't hunt far from their nests, if they don't have to), I put my head out over the tailboard of the cart and watched the stars going out, one by one, as the sky grew lighter. The dawn breeze came up as the moon went down.

When the cart stopped jouncing and shaking so much, I knew we must have turned onto the King's Highway, and when I could hear cows munching and talking softly to each other, I dropped into the road. I stood there for a little, brushing off lint and wool bits, and watching Uncle Ambrose's cart rolling on away from me. I hadn't ever been this far from home by myself. Or so lonely. The breeze brushed dry grass against my ankles, and I didn't have any idea which way to go.

I didn't even know the king's name — I'd never heard anyone call him anything but *the king*. I knew he didn't live in Hagsgate, but in a big castle somewhere nearby, only nearby's one thing when you're riding in a cart and different when you're walking. And I kept thinking about my family waking up and looking for me, and the cows' grazing sounds made me hungry, and I'd eaten all my cheese in the cart. I wished I had a penny with me — not to buy anything with, but only to toss up and let it tell me if I should turn left or right. I tried it with flat stones, but I never could find them after they came down. Finally I started off going left, not for any reason, but only because I have a little silver ring on my left hand that my mother gave me. There was a sort of path that way too, and I thought maybe I could walk around Hagsgate and then I'd think about what to do

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after that. I'm a good walker. I can walk anywhere, if you give me time.

Only it's easier on a real road. The path gave out after a while, and I had to push my way through trees growing too close together, and then through so many brambly vines that my hair was full of stickers and my arms were all stinging and bleeding. I was tired and sweating, and almost crying — *almost* — and whenever I sat down to rest, bugs and things kept crawling over me. Then I heard running water nearby, and that made me thirsty right away, so I tried to get down to the sound. I had to crawl most of the way, scratching my knees and elbows up something awful.

It wasn't much of a stream — in some places the water came up barely above my ankles — but I was so glad to see it I practically hugged and kissed it, flopping down with my face buried in it, the way I do with Malka's smelly old fur. And I drank until I couldn't hold any more, and then I sat on a stone and let the tiny fish tickle my nice cold feet, and felt the sun on my shoulders, and I didn't think about griffins or kings or my family or anything.

I only looked up when I heard the horses whickering a little way upstream. They were playing with the water, the way horses do, blowing bubbles like children. Plain old livery-stable horses, one brownish, one grayish. The gray's rider was out of the saddle, peering at the horse's left forefoot. I couldn't get a good look — they both had on plain cloaks, dark green, and trews so worn you couldn't make out the color — so I didn't know that one was a woman until I heard her voice. A nice voice, low, like Silky Joan, the lady my mother won't ever let me ask about, but with something rough in it too, as though she could scream like a hawk if she wanted to. She was saying, "There's no stone I can see. Maybe a thorn?"

The other rider, the one on the brown horse, answered her, "Or a bruise. Let me see."

That voice was lighter and younger-sounding than the woman's voice, but I already knew he was a man, because he was so tall. He got down off the brown horse and the woman moved aside to let him pick up her horse's foot. Before he did that, he put his hands on the horse's head, one on each side, and he said something to it that I couldn't quite hear. *And the horse said something back.* Not like a neigh, or a whinny, or any of the sounds horses make, but like one person talking to another. I can't say it any better than that. The tall man bent down then, and he took hold

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of the foot and looked at it for a long time, and the horse didn't move or switch its tail or anything.

"A stone splinter," the man said after a while. "It's very small, but it's worked itself deep into the hoof, and there's an ulcer brewing. I can't think why I didn't notice it straightaway."

"Well," the woman said. She touched his shoulder. "You can't notice everything."

The tall man seemed angry with himself, the way my father gets when he's forgotten to close the pasture gate properly, and our neighbor's black ram gets in and fights with our poor old Brimstone. He said, "I can. I'm supposed to." Then he turned his back to the horse and bent over that forefoot, the way our blacksmith does, and he went to work on it.

I couldn't see what he was doing, not exactly. He didn't have any picks or pries, like the blacksmith, and all I'm sure of is that I *think* he was singing to the horse. But I'm not sure it was proper singing. It sounded more like the little made-up rhymes that really small children chant to themselves when they're playing in the dirt, all alone. No tune, just up and down, *dee-dah, dee-dah, dee*...boring even for a horse, I'd have thought. He kept doing it for a long time, still bending with that hoof in his hand. All at once he stopped singing and stood up, holding something that glinted in the sun the way the stream did, and he showed it to the horse, first thing. "There," he said, "there, that's what it was. It's all right now."

He tossed the thing away and picked up the hoof again, not singing, only touching it very lightly with one finger, brushing across it again and again. Then he set the foot down, and the horse stamped once, hard, and whinnied, and the tall man turned to the woman and said, "We ought to camp here for the night, all the same. They're both weary, and my back hurts."

The woman laughed. A deep, sweet, slow sound, it was. I'd never heard a laugh like that. She said, "The greatest wizard walking the world, and your back hurts? Heal it as you healed mine, the time the tree fell on me. That took you all of five minutes, I believe."

"Longer than that," the man answered her. "You were delirious, you wouldn't remember." He touched her hair, which was thick and pretty, even though it was mostly gray. "You know how I am about that," he said.

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"I still like being mortal too much to use magic on myself. It spoils it somehow — it dulls the feeling. I've told you before."

The woman said "*Mmphh,*" the way I've heard my mother say it a thousand times. "Well, *I've* been mortal all my life, and some days...."

She didn't finish what she was saying, and the tall man smiled, the way you could tell he was teasing her. "Some days, what?"

"Nothing," the woman said, "nothing, nothing." She sounded irritable for a moment, but she put her hands on the man's arms, and she said in a different voice, "Some days — some early mornings — when the wind smells of blossoms I'll never see, and there are fawns playing in the misty orchards, and you're yawning and mumbling and scratching your head, and growling that we'll see rain before nightfall, and probably hail as well...on such mornings I wish with all my heart that we could both live forever, and I think you were a great fool to give it up." She laughed again, but it sounded shaky now, a little. She said, "Then I remember things I'd rather not remember, so then my stomach acts up, and all sorts of other things start *twingeing* me — never mind what they are, or where they hurt, whether it's my body or my head, or my heart. And then I think, *no, I suppose not, maybe not.*" The tall man put his arms around her, and for a moment she rested her head on his chest. I couldn't hear what she said after that.

I didn't think I'd made any noise, but the man raised his voice a little, not looking at me, not lifting his head, and he said, "Child, there's food here." First I couldn't move, I was so frightened. He *couldn't* have seen me through the brush and all the alder trees. And then I started remembering how hungry I was, and I started toward them without knowing I was doing it. I actually looked down at my feet and watched them moving like somebody else's feet, as though they were the hungry ones, only they had to have me take them to the food. The man and the woman stood very still and waited for me.

Close to, the woman looked younger than her voice, and the tall man looked older. No, that isn't it, that's not what I mean. She wasn't young at all, but the gray hair made her face younger, and she held herself really straight, like the lady who comes when people in our village are having babies. She holds her face all stiff too, that one, and I don't like her much. This woman's face wasn't beautiful, I suppose, but it was a face you'd want

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to snuggle up to on a cold night. That's the best I know how to say it.

The man...one minute he looked younger than my father, and the next he'd be looking older than anybody I ever saw, older than people are supposed to *be*, maybe. He didn't have any gray hair himself, but he did have a lot of lines, but that's not what I'm talking about either. It was the eyes. His eyes were green, green, *green*, not like grass, not like emeralds — I saw an emerald once, a gypsy woman showed me — and not anything like apples or limes or such stuff. Maybe like the ocean, except I've never seen the ocean, so I don't know. If you go deep enough into the woods (not the Midwood, of course not, but any other sort of woods), sooner or later you'll always come to a place where even the *shadows* are green, and that's the way his eyes were. I was afraid of his eyes at first.

The woman gave me a peach and watched me bite into it, too hungry to thank her. She asked me, "Girl, what are you doing here? Are you lost?"

"No, I'm not," I mumbled with my mouth full. "I just don't know where I am, that's different." They both laughed, but it wasn't a mean, making-fun laugh. I told them, "My name's Sooz, and I have to see the king. He lives somewhere right nearby, doesn't he?"

They looked at each other. I couldn't tell what they were thinking, but the tall man raised his eyebrows, and the woman shook her head a bit, slowly. They looked at each other for a long time, until the woman said, "Well, not nearby, but not so very far, either. We were bound on our way to visit him ourselves."

"Good," I said. "Oh, *good*." I was trying to sound as grown-up as they were, but it was hard, because I was so happy to find out that they could take me to the king. I said, "I'll go along with you, then."

The woman was against it before I got the first words out. She said to the tall man, "No, we couldn't. We don't know how things are." She looked sad about it, but she looked firm, too. She said, "Girl, it's not you worries me. The king is a good man, and an old friend, but it has been a long time, and kings change. Even more than other people, kings change."

"I have to see him," I said. "You go on, then. I'm not going home until I see him." I finished the peach, and the man handed me a chunk of dried fish and smiled at the woman as I tore into it. He said quietly to her, "It seems to me that you and I both remember asking to be taken along on a quest. I can't speak for you, but I begged."

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But the woman wouldn't let up. "We could be bringing her into great peril. You can't take the chance, it isn't right!"

He began to answer her, but I interrupted — my mother would have slapped me halfway across the kitchen. I shouted at them, "I'm *coming* from great peril. There's a griffin nested in the Midwood, and he's eaten Jehane and Louli and — and my Felicitas — " and then I *did* start weeping, and I didn't care. I just stood there and shook and wailed, and dropped the dried fish. I tried to pick it up, still crying so hard I couldn't see it, but the woman stopped me and gave me her scarf to dry my eyes and blow my nose. It smelled nice.

"Child," the tall man kept saying, "child, don't take on so, we didn't know about the griffin." The woman was holding me against her side, smoothing my hair and glaring at him as though it was his fault that I was howling like that. She said, "Of course we'll take you with us, girl dear — there, never mind, of course we will. That's a fearful matter, a griffin, but the king will know what to do about it. The king eats griffins for breakfast snacks — spreads them on toast with orange marmalade and gobbles them up, I promise you." And so on, being silly, but making me feel better, while the man went on pleading with me not to cry. I finally stopped when he pulled a big red handkerchief out of his pocket, twisted and knotted it into a bird-shape, and made it fly away. Uncle Ambrose does tricks with coins and shells, but he can't do anything like that.

His name was Schmendrick, which I still think is the funniest name I've heard in my life. The woman's name was Molly Grue. We didn't leave right away, because of the horses, but made camp where we were instead. I was waiting for the man, Schmendrick, to do it by magic, but he only built a fire, set out their blankets, and drew water from the stream like anyone else, while she hobbled the horses and put them to graze. I gathered firewood.

The woman, Molly, told me that the king's name was Lir, and that they had known him when he was a very young man, before he became king. "He is a true hero," she said, "a dragonslayer, a giantkiller, a rescuer of maidens, a solver of impossible riddles. He may be the greatest hero of all, because he's a good man as well. They aren't always."

"But you didn't want me to meet him," I said. "Why was that?"

Molly sighed. We were sitting under a tree, watching the sun go down,

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and she was brushing things out of my hair. She said, "He's old now. Schmendrick has trouble with time — I'll tell you why one day, it's a long story — and he doesn't understand that Lir may no longer be the man he was. It could be a sad reunion." She started braiding my hair around my head, so it wouldn't get in the way. "I've had an unhappy feeling about this journey from the beginning, Sooz. But *he* took a notion that Lir needed us, so here we are. You can't argue with him when he gets like that."

"A good wife isn't supposed to argue with her husband," I said. "My mother says you wait until he goes out, or he's asleep, and then you do what you want."

Molly laughed, that rich, funny sound of hers, like a kind of deep gurgle. "Sooz, I've only known you a few hours, but I'd bet every penny I've got right now — aye, and all of Schmendrick's too — that you'll be arguing on your wedding night with whomever you marry. Anyway, Schmendrick and I aren't married. We're together, that's all. We've been together quite a long while."

"Oh," I said. I didn't know any people who were together like that, not the way she said it. "Well, you *look* married. You sort of do."

Molly's face didn't change, but she put an arm around my shoulders and hugged me close for a moment. She whispered in my ear, "I wouldn't marry him if he were the last man in the world. He eats wild radishes in bed. *Crunch, crunch, crunch,* all night — *crunch, crunch, crunch.*" I giggled, and the tall man looked over at us from where he was washing a pan in the stream. The last of the sunlight was on him, and those green eyes were bright as new leaves. One of them winked at me, and I *felt* it, the way you feel a tiny breeze on your skin when it's hot. Then he went back to scrubbing the pan.

"Will it take us long to reach the king?" I asked her. "You said he didn't live too far, and I'm scared the griffin will eat somebody else while I'm gone. I need to be home."

Molly finished with my hair and gave it a gentle tug in back to bring my head up and make me look straight into her eyes. They were as gray as Schmendrick's were green, and I already knew that they turned darker or lighter gray depending on her mood. "What do you expect to happen when you meet King Lir, Sooz?" she asked me right back. "What did you have in mind when you set off to find him?"

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I was surprised, "Well, I'm going to get him to come back to my village with me. All those knights he keeps sending aren't doing any good at all, so he'll just have to take care of that griffin himself. He's the king. It's his job."

"Yes," Molly said, but she said it so softly I could barely hear her. She patted my arm once, lightly, and then she got up and walked away to sit by herself near the fire. She made it look as though she was banking the fire, but she wasn't really.

We started out early the next morning. Molly had me in front of her on her horse for a time, but by and by Schmendrick took me up on his, to spare the other one's sore foot. He was more comfortable to lean against than I'd expected — bony in some places, nice and springy in others. He didn't talk much, but he sang a lot as we went along, sometimes in languages I couldn't make out a word of, sometimes making up silly songs to make me laugh, like this one:

Soozli, Soozli,
speaking loozli,
you disturb my oozli-goozli.
Soozli, Soozli,
would you choozli
to become my squoozli-squoozli?

He didn't do anything magic, except maybe once, when a crow kept diving at the horse — out of meanness, that's all, there wasn't a nest anywhere — making the poor thing dance and shy and skitter until I almost fell off. Schmendrick finally turned in the saddle and *looked* at it, and the next minute a hawk came swooping out of nowhere and chased that crow screaming into a thornbush where the hawk couldn't follow. I guess that was magic.

It was actually pretty country we were passing through, once we got onto the proper road. Trees, meadows, little soft valleys, hillsides covered with wildflowers I didn't know. You could see they got a lot more rain here than we do where I live. It's a good thing sheep don't need grazing, the way cows do. They'll go where the goats go, and goats will go anywhere. We're like that in my village, we have to be. But I liked this land better.

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Schmendrick told me it hadn't always been like that. "Before Lir, this was all barren desert where nothing grew — *nothing*, Sooz. It was said that the country was under a curse, and in a way it was, but I'll tell you about that another time." People *always* say that when you're a child, and I hate it. "But Lir changed everything. The land was so glad to see him that it began blooming and blossoming the moment he became king, and it has done so ever since. Except poor Hagsgate, but that's another story too." His voice got slower and deeper when he talked about Hagsgate, as though he weren't talking to me.

I twisted my neck around to look up at him. "Do you think King Lir will come back with me and kill that griffin? I think Molly thinks he won't, because he's so old." I hadn't known I was worried about that until I actually said it.

"Why, of course he will, girl." Schmendrick winked at me again. "He never could resist the plea of a maiden in distress, the more difficult and dangerous the deed, the better. If he did not spur to your village's aid himself at the first call, it was surely because he was engaged on some other heroic venture. I'm as certain as I can be that as soon as you make your request — remember to curtsey properly — he'll snatch up his great sword and spear, whisk you up to his saddlebow, and be off after your griffin with the road smoking behind him. Young or old, that's always been his way." He rumpled my hair in the back. "Molly overworries. That's *her* way. We are who we are."

"What's a curtsey?" I asked him. I know now, because Molly showed me, but I didn't then. He didn't laugh, except with his eyes, then gestured for me to face forward again as he went back to singing.

Soozli, Soozli,
you amuse me,
right down to my solesli-shoesli.
Soozli, Soozli,
I bring newsli —
we could wed next stewsli-Tuesli.

I learned that the king had lived in a castle on a cliff by the sea when he was young, less than a day's journey from Hagsgate, but it fell down —

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Schmendrick wouldn't tell me how — so he built a new one somewhere else. I was sorry about that, because I've never seen the sea, and I've always wanted to, and I still haven't. But I'd never seen a castle, either, so there was that. I leaned back against his chest and fell asleep.

They'd been traveling slowly, taking time to let Molly's horse heal, but once its hoof was all right we galloped most of the rest of the way. Those horses of theirs didn't look magic or special, but they could run for hours without getting tired, and when I helped to rub them down and curry them, they were hardly sweating. They slept on their sides, like people, not standing up, the way our horses do.

Even so, it took us three full days to reach King Lir. Molly said he had bad memories of the castle that fell down, so that was why this one was as far from the sea as he could make it, and as different from the old one. It was on a hill, so the king could see anyone coming along the road, but there wasn't a moat, and there weren't any guards in armor, and there was only one banner on the walls. It was blue, with a picture of a white unicorn on it. Nothing else.

I was disappointed. I tried not to show it, but Molly saw. "You wanted a fortress," she said to me gently. "You were expecting dark stone towers, flags and cannons and knights, trumpeters blowing from the battlements. I'm sorry. It being your first castle, and all."

"No, it's a *pretty* castle," I said. And it *was* pretty, sitting peacefully on its hilltop in the sunlight, surrounded by all those wildflowers. There was a marketplace, I could see now, and there were huts like ours snugged up against the castle walls, so that the people could come inside for protection, if they needed to. I said, "Just looking at it, you can see that the king is a nice man."

Molly was looking at me with her head a little bit to one side. She said, "He is a hero, Sooz. Remember that, whatever else you see, whatever you think. Lir is a hero."

"Well, I know *that*," I said. "I'm sure he'll help me. I am."

But I wasn't. The moment I saw that nice, friendly castle, I wasn't a bit sure.

We didn't have any trouble getting in. The gate simply opened when Schmendrick knocked once, and he and Molly and I walked in through the market, where people were selling all kinds of fruits and vegetables, pots

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and pans and clothing and so on, the way they do in our village. They all called to us to come over to their barrows and buy things, but nobody tried to stop us going into the castle. There were two men at the two great doors, and they did ask us our names and why we wanted to see King Lir. The moment Schmendrick told them his name, they stepped back quickly and let us by, so I began to think that maybe he actually was a great magician, even if I never saw him do anything but little tricks and little songs. The men didn't offer to take him to the king, and he didn't ask.

Molly was right. I *was* expecting the castle to be all cold and shadowy, with queens looking sideways at us, and big men clanking by in armor. But the halls we followed Schmendrick through were full of sunlight from long, high windows, and the people we saw mostly nodded and smiled at us. We passed a stone stair curling up out of sight, and I was sure that the king must live at the top, but Schmendrick never looked at it. He led us straight through the great hall — they had a fireplace big enough to roast three cows! — and on past the kitchens and the scullery and the laundry, to a room under another stair. *That* was dark. You wouldn't have found it unless you knew where to look. Schmendrick didn't knock at that door, and he didn't say anything magic to make it open. He just stood outside and waited, and by and by it rattled open, and we went in.

The king was in there. All by himself, the king was in there.

He was sitting on an ordinary wooden chair, not a throne. It was a really small room, the same size as my mother's weaving room, so maybe that's why he looked so big. He was as tall as Schmendrick, but he seemed so much *wider*. I was ready for him to have a long beard, spreading out all across his chest, but he only had a short one, like my father, except white. He wore a red and gold mantle, and there was a real golden crown on his white head, not much bigger than the wreaths we put on our champion rams at the end of the year. He had a kind face, with a big old nose, and big blue eyes, like a little boy. But his eyes were so tired and heavy, I didn't know how he kept them open. Sometimes he didn't. There was nobody else in the little room, and he peered at the three of us as though he knew he knew us, but not *why*. He tried to smile.

Schmendrick said very gently, "Majesty, it is Schmendrick and Molly, Molly Grue." The king blinked at him.

"Molly with the cat," Molly whispered. "You remember the cat, Lir."

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"Yes," the king said. It seemed to take him forever to speak that one word. "The cat, yes, of course." But he didn't say anything after that, and we stood there and stood there, and the king kept smiling at something I couldn't see.

Schmendrick said to Molly, "*She* used to forget herself like that." His voice had changed, the same way it changed when he was talking about the way the land used to be. He said, "And then you would always remind her that she was a unicorn."

And the king changed too then. All at once his eyes were clear and shining with feeling, like Molly's eyes, and he *saw* us for the first time. He said softly, "Oh, my friends!" and he stood up and came to us and put his arms around Schmendrick and Molly. And I saw that he had been a hero, and that he was still a hero, and I began to think it might be all right, after all. Maybe it was really going to be all right.

"And who may this princess be?" he asked, looking straight at me. He had the proper voice for a king, deep and strong, but not frightening, not mean. I tried to tell him my name, but I couldn't make a sound, so he actually knelt on one knee in front of me, and he took my hand. He said, "I have often been of some use to princesses in distress. Command me."

"I'm not a princess, I'm Sooz," I said, "and I'm from a village you wouldn't even know, and there's a griffin eating the children." It all tumbled out like that, in one breath, but he didn't laugh or look at me any differently. What he did was ask me the name of my village, and I told him, and he said, "But indeed I know it, madam. I have been there. And now I will have the pleasure of returning."

Over his shoulder I saw Schmendrick and Molly staring at each other. Schmendrick was about to say something, but then they both turned toward the door, because a small dark woman, about my mother's age, only dressed in tunic, trews, and boots like Molly, had just come in. She said in a small, worried voice, "I am so truly sorry that I was not here to greet His Majesty's old companions. No need to tell me your illustrious names — my own is Lisene, and I am the king's royal secretary, translator, and protector." She took King Lir's arm, very politely and carefully, and began moving him back to his chair.

Schmendrick seemed to take a minute getting his own breath back.

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He said, "I have never known my old friend Lir to need any of those services. Especially a protector."

Lisene was busy with the king and didn't look at Schmendrick as she answered him. "How long has it been since you saw him last?" Schmendrick didn't answer. Lisene's voice was quiet still, but not so nervous. "Time sets its claw in us all, my lord, sooner or later. We are none of us that which we were." King Lir sat down obediently on his chair and closed his eyes.

I could tell that Schmendrick was angry, and growing angrier as he stood there, but he didn't show it. My father gets angry like that, which is how I knew. He said, "His Majesty has agreed to return to this young person's village with her, in order to rid her people of a marauding griffin. We will start out tomorrow."

Lisene swung around on us so fast that I was sure she was going to start shouting and giving everybody orders. But she didn't do anything like that. You could never have told that she was the least bit annoyed or alarmed. All she said was, "I am afraid that will not be possible, my lord. The king is in no fit condition for such a journey, nor certainly for such a deed."

"The king thinks rather differently." Schmendrick was talking through clenched teeth now.

"Does he, then?" Lisene pointed at King Lir, and I saw that he had fallen asleep in his chair. His head was drooping — I was afraid his crown was going to fall off — and his mouth hung open. Lisene said, "You came seeking the peerless warrior you remember, and you have found a spent, senile old man. Believe me, I understand your distress, but you must see — "

Schmendrick cut her off. I never understood what people meant when they talked about someone's eyes actually flashing, but at least green eyes can do it. He looked even taller than he was, and when he pointed a finger at Lisene I honestly expected the little woman to catch fire or maybe melt away. Schmendrick's voice was especially frightening because it was so quiet. He said, "Hear me now. I am Schmendrick the Magician, and I see my old friend Lir, as I have always seen him, wise and powerful and good, beloved of a unicorn."

And with that word, for a second time, the king woke up. His blinked once, then gripped the arms of the chair and pushed himself to his feet. He

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didn't look at us, but at Lisene, and he said, "I will go with them. It is my task and my gift. You will see to it that I am made ready."

Lisene said, "Majesty, no! Majesty, I beg you!"

King Lir reached out and took Lisene's head between his big hands, and I saw that there was love between them. He said, "It is what I am for. You know that as well as *he* does. See to it, Lisene, and keep all well for me while I am gone."

Lisene looked so sad, so *lost*, that I didn't know what to think, about her or King Lir or anything. I didn't realize that I had moved back against Molly Grue until I felt her hand in my hair. She didn't say anything, but it was nice smelling her there. Lisene said, very quietly, "I will see to it."

She turned around then and started for the door with her head lowered. I think she wanted to pass us by without looking at us at all, but she couldn't do it. Right at the door, her head came up and she stared at Schmendrick so hard that I pushed into Molly's skirt so I couldn't see her eyes. I heard her say, as though she could barely make the words come out, "His death be on your head, magician." I think she was crying, only not the way grown people do.

And I heard Schmendrick's answer, and his voice was so cold I wouldn't have recognized it if I didn't know. "He has died before. Better that death — better this, better *any* death — than the one he was dying in that chair. If the griffin kills him, it will yet have saved his life." I heard the door close.

I asked Molly, speaking as low as I could, "What did he mean, about the king having died?" But she put me to one side, and she went to King Lir and knelt in front of him, reaching up to take one of his hands between hers. She said, "Lord...Majesty...friend...dear friend — remember. Oh, please, please *remember*."

The old man was swaying on his feet, but he put his other hand on Molly's head and he mumbled, "Child, Sooz — is that your pretty name, Sooz? — of course I will come to your village. The griffin was never hatched that dares harm King Lir's people." He sat down hard in the chair again, but he held onto her hand tightly. He looked at her, with his blue eyes wide and his mouth trembling a little. He said, "But you must remind me, little one. When I...when I lose myself — when I lose *her* — you must remind me that I am still searching, still waiting...that I have never

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forgotten her, never turned from all she taught me. I sit in this place...I *sit*...because a king has to sit, you see...but in my mind, in my poor mind, I am always away with *her*...."

I didn't have any idea what he was talking about. I do now.

He fell asleep again then, holding Molly's hand. She sat with him for a long time, resting her head on his knee. Schmendrick went off to make sure Lisene was doing what she was supposed to do, getting everything ready for the king's departure. There was a lot of clattering and shouting already, enough so you'd have thought a war was starting, but nobody came in to see King Lir or speak to him, wish him luck or anything. It was almost as though he wasn't really there.

Me, I tried to write a letter home, with pictures of the king and the castle, but I fell asleep like him, and I slept the rest of that day and all night too. I woke up in a bed I couldn't remember getting into, with Schmendrick looking down at me, saying, "Up, child, on your feet. You started all this uproar—it's time for you to see it through. The king is coming to slay your griffin."

I was out of bed before he'd finished speaking. I said, "Now? Are we going right now?"

Schmendrick shrugged his shoulders. "By noon, anyway, if I can finally get Lisene and the rest of them to understand that they are *not* coming. Lisene wants to bring fifty men-at-arms, a dozen wagonloads of supplies, a regiment of runners to send messages back and forth, and every wretched physician in the kingdom." He sighed and spread his hands. "I may have to turn the lot of them to stone if we are to be off today."

I thought he was probably joking, but I already knew that you couldn't be sure with Schmendrick. He said, "If Lir comes with a train of followers, there will be no Lir. Do you understand me, Sooz?" I shook my head. Schmendrick said, "It is my fault. If I had made sure to visit here more often, there were things I could have done to restore the Lir Molly and I once knew. My fault, my thoughtlessness."

I remembered Molly telling me, "Schmendrick has trouble with time." I still didn't know what she meant, nor this either. I said, "It's just the way old people get. We have old men in our village who talk like him. One woman, too, Mam Jennet. She always cries when it rains."

Schmendrick clenched his fist and pounded it against his leg. "King

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Lir is *not* mad, girl, nor is he senile, as Lisene called him. He is *Lir*, Lir still, I promise you that. It is only here, in this castle, surrounded by good, loyal people who love him — who will love him to death, if they are allowed — that he sinks into...into the condition you have seen." He didn't say anything more for a moment; then he stooped a little to peer closely at me. "Did you notice the change in him when I spoke of unicorns?"

"Unicorn," I answered. "One unicorn who loved him. I noticed."

Schmendrick kept looking at me in a new way, as though we'd never met before. He said, "Your pardon, Sooz. I keep taking you for a child. Yes. One unicorn. He has not seen her since he became king, but he is what he is because of her. And when I speak that word, when Molly or I say her name — which I have not done yet — then he is recalled to himself." He paused for a moment, and then added, very softly, "As we had so often to do for her, so long ago."

"I didn't know unicorns had names," I said. "I didn't know they ever loved people."

"They don't. Only this one." He turned and walked away swiftly, saying over his shoulder, "Her name was Amalthea. Go find Molly, she'll see you fed."

The room I'd slept in wasn't big, not for something in a castle. Catania, the headwoman of our village, has a bedroom nearly as large, which I know because I play with her daughter Sophia. But the sheets I'd been under were embroidered with a crown, and engraved on the headboard was a picture of the blue banner with the white unicorn. I had slept the night in King Lir's own bed while he dozed in an old wooden chair.

I didn't wait to have breakfast with Molly, but ran straight to the little room where I had last seen the king. He was there, but so changed that I froze in the doorway, trying to get my breath. Three men were bustling around him like tailors, dressing him in his armor: all the padding underneath, first, and then the different pieces for the arms and legs and shoulders. I don't know any of the names. The men hadn't put his helmet on him, so his head stuck out at the top, white-haired and big-nosed and blue-eyed, but he didn't look silly like that. He looked like a giant.

When he saw me, he smiled, and it was a warm, happy smile, but it was a little frightening too, almost a little terrible, like the time I saw the griffin burning in the black sky. It was a hero's smile. I'd never seen one

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before. He called to me, "Little one, come and buckle on my sword, if you would. It would be an honor for me."

The men had to show me how you do it. The swordbelt, all by itself, was so heavy it kept slipping through my fingers, and I did need help with the buckle. But I put the sword into its sheath alone, although I needed both hands to lift it. When it slid home it made a sound like a great door slamming shut. King Lir touched my face with one of his cold iron gloves and said, "Thank you, little one. The next time that blade is drawn, it will be to free your village. You have my word."

Schmendrick came in then, took one look, and just shook his head. He said, "This is the most ridiculous...It is four days' ride — perhaps five — with the weather turning hot enough to broil a lobster on an iceberg. There's no need for armor until he faces the griffin." You could see how stupid he felt they all were, but King Lir smiled at him the same way he'd smiled at me, and Schmendrick stopped talking.

King Lir said, "Old friend, I go forth as I mean to return. It is my way."

Schmendrick looked like a little boy himself for a moment. All he could say was, "Your business. Don't blame me, that's all. At *least* leave the helmet off."

He was about to turn away and stalk out of the room, but Molly came up behind him and said, "Oh, Majesty — Lir — how grand! How beautiful you are!" She sounded the way my Aunt Zerelda sounds when she's carrying on about my brother Wilfrid. He could mess his pants and jump in a hog pen, and Aunt Zerelda would still think he was the best, smartest boy in the whole world. But Molly was different. She brushed those tailors, or whatever they were, straight aside, and she stood on tiptoe to smooth King Lir's white hair, and I heard her whisper, "I wish *she* could see you."

King Lir looked at her for a long time without saying anything. Schmendrick stood there, off to the side, and he didn't say anything either, but they were together, the three of them. I wish that Felicitas and I could have been together like that when we got old. Could have had time. Then King Lir looked at *me*, and he said, "The child is waiting." And that's how we set off for home. The king, Schmendrick, Molly, and me.

To the last minute, poor old Lisene kept trying to get King Lir to take some knights or soldiers with him. She actually followed us on foot when we left, calling, "Highness — Majesty — if you will have none else, take

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me! Take me!" At that the king stopped and turned and went back to her. He got down off his horse and embraced Lisene, and I don't know what they said to each other, but Lisene didn't follow anymore after that.

I rode with the king most of the time, sitting up in front of him on his skittery black mare. I wasn't sure I could trust her not to bite me, or to kick me when I wasn't looking, but King Lir told me, "It is only peaceful times that make her nervous, be assured of that. When dragons charge her, belching death — for the fumes are more dangerous than the flames, little one — when your griffin swoops down at her, you will see her at her best." I still didn't like her much, but I did like the king. He didn't sing to me, the way Schmendrick had, but he told me stories, and they weren't fables or fairytales. These were real, true stories, and he knew they were true because they had all happened to him! I never heard stories like those, and I never will again. I know that for certain.

He told me more things to keep in mind if you have to fight a dragon, and he told me how he learned that ogres aren't always as stupid as they look, and why you should never swim in a mountain pool when the snows are melting, and how you can *sometimes* make friends with a troll. He talked about his father's castle, where he grew up, and about how he met Schmendrick and Molly there, and even about Molly's cat, which he said was a little thing with a funny crooked ear. But when I asked him why the castle fell down, he wouldn't exactly say, no more than Schmendrick would. His voice became very quiet and faraway. "I forget things, you know, little one," he said. "I try to hold on, but I do forget."

Well, I knew *that*. He kept calling Molly Sooz, and he never called me anything but *little one,* and Schmendrick kept having to remind him where we were bound and why. That was always at night, though. He was usually fine during the daytime. And when he did turn confused again, and wander off (not just in his mind, either — I found him in the woods one night, talking to a tree as though it was his father), all you had to do was mention a white unicorn named Amalthea, and he'd come to himself almost right away. Generally it was Schmendrick who did that, but I brought him back that time, holding my hand and telling me how you can recognize a pooka, and why you need to. But I could never get him to say a word about the unicorn.

Autumn comes early where I live. The days were still hot, and the

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king never would take his armor off, except to sleep, not even his helmet with the big blue plume on top, but at night I burrowed in between Molly and Schmendrick for warmth, and you could hear the stags belling everywhere all the time, crazy with the season. One of them actually charged King Lir's horse while I was riding with him, and Schmendrick was about to do something magic to the stag, the same way he'd done with the crow. But the king laughed and rode straight at him, right *into* those horns. I screamed, but the black mare never hesitated, and the stag turned at the last moment and ambled out of sight in the brush. He was wagging his tail in circles, the way goats do, and looking as puzzled and dreamy as King Lir himself.

I was proud, once I got over being frightened. But both Schmendrick and Molly scolded him, and he kept apologizing to me for the rest of the day for having put me in danger, as Molly had once said he would. "I forgot you were with me, little one, and for that I will always ask your pardon." Then he smiled at me with that beautiful, terrible hero's smile I'd seen before, and he said, "But oh, little one, the remembering!" And that night he didn't wander away and get himself lost. Instead he sat happily by the fire with us and sang a whole long song about the adventures of an outlaw called Captain Cully. I'd never heard of him, but it's a really good song.

We reached my village late on the afternoon of the fourth day, and Schmendrick made us stop together before we rode in. He said, directly to me, "Sooz, if you tell them that this is the king himself, there will be nothing but noise and joy and celebration, and nobody will get any rest with all that carrying-on. It would be best for you to tell them that we have brought King Lir's greatest knight with us, and that he needs a night to purify himself in prayer and meditation before he deals with your griffin." He took hold of my chin and made me look into his green, green eyes, and he said, "Girl, you have to trust me. I always know what I'm doing—that's my trouble. Tell your people what I've said." And Molly touched me and looked at me without saying anything, so I knew it was all right.

I left them camped on the outskirts of the village, and walked home by myself. Malka met me first. She smelled me before I even reached Simon and Elsie's tavern, and she came running and crashed into my legs and knocked me over, and then pinned me down with her paws on my shoulders, and kept licking my face until I had to nip her nose to make her

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let me up and run to the house with me. My father was out with the flock, but my mother and Wilfrid were there, and they grabbed me and nearly strangled me, and they cried over me — rotten, stupid Wilfrid too! — because everyone had been so certain that I'd been taken and eaten by the griffin. After that, once she got done crying, my mother spanked me for running off in Uncle Ambrose's cart without telling anyone, and when my father came in, he spanked me all over again. But I didn't mind.

I told them I'd seen King Lir in person, and been in his castle, and I said what Schmendrick had told me to say, but nobody was much cheered by it. My father just sat down and grunted, "Oh, aye — another great warrior for our comfort and the griffin's dessert. Your bloody king won't ever come here his bloody self, you can be sure of that." My mother reproached him for talking like that in front of Wilfrid and me, but he went on, "Maybe he cared about places like this, people like us once, but he's old now, and old kings only care who's going to be king after them. You can't tell me anything different."

I wanted more than anything to tell him that King Lir *was* here, less than half a mile from our doorstep, but I didn't, and not only because Schmendrick had told me not to. I wasn't sure what the king might look like, white-haired and shaky and not here all the time, to people like my father. I wasn't sure what he looked like to me, for that matter. He was a lovely, dignified old man who told wonderful stories, but when I tried to imagine him riding alone into the Midwood to do battle with a griffin, a griffin that had already eaten his best knights...to be honest, I couldn't do it. Now that I'd actually brought him all the way home with me, as I'd set out to do, I was suddenly afraid that I'd drawn him to his death. And I knew I wouldn't ever forgive myself if that happened.

I wanted so much to see them that night, Schmendrick and Molly and the king. I wanted to sleep out there on the ground with them, and listen to their talk, and then maybe I'd not worry so much about the morning. But of course there wasn't a chance of that. My family would hardly let me out of their sight to wash my face. Wilfrid kept following me around, asking endless questions about the castle, and my father took me to Catania, who had me tell the whole story over again, and agreed with him that whomever the king had sent this time wasn't likely to be any more use than the others had been. And my mother kept feeding me and

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scolding me and hugging me, all more or less at the same time. And then, in the night, we heard the griffin, making that soft, lonely, horrible sound it makes when it's hunting. So I didn't get very much sleep, between one thing and another.

But at sunrise, after I'd helped Wilfrid milk the goats, they let me run out to the camp, as long as Malka came with me, which was practically like having my mother along. Molly was already helping King Lir into his armor, and Schmendrick was burying the remains of last night's dinner, as though they were starting one more ordinary day on their journey to somewhere. They greeted me, and Schmendrick thanked me for doing as he'd asked, so that the king could have a restful night before he —

I didn't let him finish. I didn't know I was going to do it, I swear, but I ran up to King Lir, and I threw my arms around him, and I said, "Don't go! I changed my mind, don't go!" Just like Lisene.

King Lir looked down at me. He seemed as tall as a tree right then, and he patted my head very gently with his iron glove. He said, "Little one, I have a griffin to slay. It is my job."

Which was what I'd said myself, though it seemed like years ago, and that made it so much worse. I said a second time, "I changed my mind! Somebody else can fight the griffin, you don't have to! You go home! You go home *now* and live your life, and be the king, and everything...." I was babbling and sniffling, and generally being a baby, I know that. I'm glad Wilfrid didn't see me.

King Lir kept petting me with one hand and trying to put me aside with the other, but I wouldn't let go. I think I was actually trying to pull his sword out of its sheath, to take it away from him. He said, "No, no, little one, you don't understand. There are some monsters that only a king can kill. I have always known that — I should never, never have sent those poor men to die in my place. No one else in all the land can do this for you and your village. Most truly now, it is my job." And he kissed my hand, the way he must have kissed the hands of so many queens. He kissed my hand too, just like theirs.

Molly came up then and took me away from him. She held me close, and she stroked my hair, and she told me, "Child, Sooz, there's no turning back for him now, or for you either. It was your fate to bring this last cause to him, and his fate to take it up, and neither of you could have done

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differently, being who you are. And now you must be as brave as he is, and see it all play out." She caught herself there, and changed it. "Rather, you must wait to learn how it has played out, because you are certainly not coming into that forest with us."

"I'm coming," I said. "You can't stop me. Nobody can." I wasn't sniffling or anything anymore. I said it like that, that's all.

Molly held me at arm's length, and she shook me a little bit. She said, "Sooz, if you can tell me that your parents have given their permission, then you may come. Have they done so?"

I didn't answer her. She shook me again, gentler this time, saying, "Oh, that was wicked of me, forgive me, my dear friend. I knew the day we met that you could never learn to lie." Then she took both of my hands between hers, and she said, "Lead us to the Midwood, if you will, Sooz, and we will say our farewells there. Will you do that for us? For me?"

I nodded, but I still didn't speak. I couldn't, my throat was hurting so much. Molly squeezed my hands and said, "Thank you." Schmendrick came up and made some kind of sign to her with his eyes, or his eyebrows, because she said, "Yes, I know," although he hadn't said a thing. So she went to King Lir with him, and I was alone, trying to stop shaking. I managed it, after a while.

The Midwood isn't far. They wouldn't really have needed my help to find it. You can see the beginning of it from the roof of Ellis the baker's house, which is the tallest one on that side of the village. It's always dark, even from a distance, even if you're not actually in it. I don't know if that's because they're oak trees (we have all sorts of tales and sayings about oaken woods, and the creatures that live there) or maybe because of some enchantment, or because of the griffin. Maybe it was different before the griffin came. Uncle Ambrose says it's been a bad place all his life, but my father says no, he and his friends used to hunt there, and he actually picnicked there once or twice with my mother, when they were young.

King Lir rode in front, looking grand and almost young, with his head up and the blue plume on his helmet floating above him, more like a banner than a feather. I was going to ride with Molly, but the king leaned from his saddle as I started past, and swooped me up before him, saying, "You shall guide and company me, little one, until we reach the forest." I was proud of that, but I was frightened too, because he was so happy, and

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I knew he was going to his death, trying to make up for all those knights he'd sent to fight the griffin. I didn't try to warn him. He wouldn't have heard me, and I knew that too. Me and poor old Lisene.

He told me all about griffins as we rode. He said, "If you should ever have dealings with a griffin, little one, you must remember that they are not like dragons. A dragon is simply a dragon — make yourself small when it dives down at you, but hold your ground and strike at the underbelly, and you've won the day. But a griffin, now...a griffin is two highly dissimilar creatures, eagle and lion, fused together by some god with a god's sense of humor. And so there is an eagle's heart beating in the beast, and a lion's heart as well, and you must pierce them both to have any hope of surviving the battle." He was as cheerful as he could be about it all, holding me safe on the saddle, and saying over and over, the way old people do, "Two hearts, never forget that — many people do. Eagle heart, lion heart — eagle heart, lion heart. *Never* forget, little one."

We passed a lot of people I knew, out with their sheep and goats, and they all waved to me, and called, and made jokes, and so on. They cheered for King Lir, but they didn't bow to him, or take off their caps, because nobody recognized him, nobody knew. He seemed delighted about that, which most kings probably wouldn't be. But he's the only king I've met, so I can't say.

The Midwood seemed to be reaching out for us before we were anywhere near it, long fingery shadows stretching across the empty fields, and the leaves flickering and blinking, though there wasn't any wind. A forest is usually really noisy, day and night, if you stand still and listen to the birds and the insects and the streams and such, but the Midwood is always silent, silent. That reaches out too, the silence.

We halted a stone's throw from the forest, and King Lir said to me, "We part here, little one," and set me down on the ground as carefully as though he was putting a bird back in its nest. He said to Schmendrick, "I know better than to try to keep you and Sooz from following —" he kept on calling Molly by my name, every time, I don't know why — "but I enjoin you, in the name of great Nikos himself, and in the name of our long and precious friendship...." He stopped there, and he didn't say anything more for such a while that I was afraid he was back to forgetting who he was and why he was there, the way he had been. But then he went on, clear

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and ringing as one of those mad stags, "I charge you in *her* name, in the name of the Lady Amalthea, not to assist me in any way from the moment we pass the very first tree, but to leave me altogether to what is mine to do. Is that understood between us, dear ones of my heart?"

Schmendrick hated it. You didn't have to be magic to see that. It was so plain, even to me, that he had been planning to take over the battle as soon as they were actually facing the griffin. But King Lir was looking right at him with those young blue eyes, and with a little bit of a smile on his face, and Schmendrick simply didn't know what to do. There wasn't anything he *could* do, so he finally nodded and mumbled, "If that is Your Majesty's wish." The king couldn't hear him at all the first time, so he made him say it again.

And then, of course, everybody had to say good-bye to me, since I wasn't allowed to go any farther with them. Molly said she knew we'd see each other again, and Schmendrick told me that I had the makings of a real warrior queen, only he was certain I was too smart to be one. And King Lir...King Lir said to me, very quietly, so nobody else could hear, "Little one, if I had married and had a daughter, I would have asked no more than that she should be as brave and kind and loyal as you. Remember that, as I will remember you to my last day."

Which was all nice, and I wished my mother and father could have heard what all these grown people were saying about me. But then they turned and rode on into the Midwood, the three of them, and only Molly looked back at me. And I think *that* was to make sure I wasn't following, because I was supposed just to go home and wait to find out if my friends were alive or dead, and if the griffin was going to be eating any more children. It was all over.

And maybe I would have gone home and let it be all over, if it hadn't been for Malka.

She should have been with the sheep and not with me, of course — that's her job, the same way King Lir was doing his job, going to meet the griffin. But Malka thinks I'm a sheep too, the most stupid, aggravating sheep she ever had to guard, forever wandering away into some kind of danger. All the way to the Midwood she had trotted quietly alongside the king's horse, but now that we were alone again she came rushing up and bounced all over me, barking like thunder and knocking me down, hard,

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the way she does whenever I'm not where she wants me to be. I always brace myself when I see her coming, but it never helps.

What she does then, before I'm on my feet, is take the hem of my smock in her jaws and start tugging me in the direction she thinks I should go. But this time...this time she suddenly got up, as though she'd forgotten all about me, and she stared past me at the Midwood with all the white showing in her eyes and a low sound coming out of her that I don't think she knew she could make. The next moment, she was gone, racing into the forest with foam flying from her mouth and her big ragged ears flat back. I called, but she couldn't have heard me, baying and barking the way she was.

Well, I didn't have any choice. King Lir and Schmendrick and Molly all had a choice, going after the Midwood griffin, but Malka was my dog, and she didn't know what she was facing, and I *couldn't* let her face it by herself. So there wasn't anything else for me to do. I took an enormous long breath and looked around me, and then I walked into the forest after her.

Actually, I ran, as long as I could, and then I walked until I could run again, and then I ran some more. There aren't any paths into the Midwood, because nobody goes there, so it wasn't hard to see where three horses had pushed through the undergrowth, and then a dog's tracks on top of the hoofprints. It was very quiet with no wind, not one bird calling, no sound but my own panting. I couldn't even hear Malka anymore. I was hoping that maybe they'd come on the griffin while it was asleep, and King Lir had already killed it in its nest. I didn't think so, though. He'd probably have decided it wasn't honorable to attack a sleeping griffin, and wakened it up for a fair fight. I hadn't known him very long, but I knew what he'd do.

Then, a little way ahead of me, the whole forest exploded.

It was too much noise for me to sort it out in my head. There was Malka absolutely *howling*, and birds bursting up everywhere out of the brush, and Schmendrick or the king or someone was shouting, only I couldn't make out any of the words. And underneath it all was something that wasn't loud at all, a sound somewhere between a growl and that terrible soft call, like a frightened child. Then — just as I broke into the clearing — the rattle and scrape of knives, only much louder this time, as the griffin shot straight up with the sun on its wings. Its cold golden eyes *bit* into mine, and its beak was open so wide you could see down and down the blazing red gullet. It filled the sky.

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And King Lir, astride his black mare, filled the clearing. He was as huge as the griffin, and his sword was the size of a boar spear, and he shook it at the griffin, daring it to light down and fight him on the ground. But the griffin was staying out of range, circling overhead to get a good look at these strange new people. Malka was utterly off her head, screaming and hurling herself into the air again and again, snapping at the griffin's lion feet and eagle claws, but coming down each time without so much as an iron feather between her teeth. I lunged and caught her in the air, trying to drag her away before the griffin turned on her, but she fought me, scratching my face with her own dull dog claws, until I had to let her go. The last time she leaped, the griffin suddenly stooped and caught her full on her side with one huge wing, so hard that she couldn't get a sound out, no more than I could. She flew all the way across the clearing, slammed into a tree, fell to the ground, and after that she didn't move.

Molly told me later that that was when King Lir struck for the griffin's lion heart. I didn't see it. I was flying across the clearing myself, throwing myself over Malka, in case the griffin came after her again, and I didn't see anything except her staring eyes and the blood on her side. But I did hear the griffin's roar when it happened, and when I could turn my head, I saw the blood splashing along *its* side, and the back legs squinching up against its belly, the way you do when you're really hurting. King Lir shouted like a boy. He threw that great sword as high as the griffin, and snatched it back again, and then he charged toward the griffin as it wobbled lower and lower, with its crippled lion half dragging it out of the air. It landed with a saggy thump, just like Malka, and there was a moment when I was absolutely sure it was dead. I remember I was thinking, very far away, *this is good, I'm glad, I'm sure I'm glad.*

But Schmendrick was screaming at the king, "Two hearts! *Two hearts!*" until his voice split with it, and Molly was on me, trying to drag me away from the griffin, and *I* was hanging onto Malka — she'd gotten so *heavy* — and I don't know what else was happening right then, because all I was seeing and thinking about was Malka. And all I was feeling was her heart not beating under mine.

She guarded my cradle when I was born. I cut my teeth on her poor ears, and she never made one sound. My mother says so.

King Lir wasn't seeing or hearing any of us. There was nothing in the

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world for him but the griffin, which was flopping and struggling lopsidedly in the middle of the clearing. I couldn't help feeling sorry for it, even then, even after it had killed Malka and my friends, and all the sheep and goats too, and I don't know how many else. And King Lir must have felt the same way, because he got down from his black mare and went straight up to the griffin, and he spoke to it, lowering his sword until the tip was on the ground. He said, "You were a noble and terrible adversary — surely the last such I will ever confront. We have accomplished what we were born to do, the two of us. I thank you for your death."

And on that last word, the griffin had him.

It was the eagle, lunging up at him, dragging the lion half along, the way I'd been dragging Malka's dead weight. King Lir stepped back, swinging the sword fast enough to take off the griffin's head, but it was faster than he was. That dreadful beak caught him at the waist, shearing through his armor the way an axe would smash through piecrust, and he doubled over without a sound that I heard, looking like wetwash on the line. There was blood, and worse, and I couldn't have said if he were dead or alive. I thought the griffin was going to bite him in two.

I shook loose from Molly. She was calling to Schmendrick to *do* something, but of course he couldn't, and she knew it, because he'd promised King Lir that he wouldn't interfere by magic, whatever happened. But I wasn't a magician, and I hadn't promised anything to anybody. I told Malka I'd be right back.

The griffin didn't see me coming. It was bending its head down over King Lir, hiding him with its wings. The lion part trailing along so limply in the dust made it more fearful to see, though I can't say why, and it was making a sort of cooing, purring sound all the time. I had a big rock in my left hand, and a dead branch in my right, and I was bawling something, but I don't remember what. You can scare wolves away from the flock sometimes if you run at them like that, determined.

I can throw things hard with either hand — Wilfrid found *that* out when I was still small — and the griffin looked up fast when the rock hit it on the side of its neck. It didn't like that, but it was too busy with King Lir to bother with me. I didn't think for a minute that my branch was going to be any use on even a half-dead griffin, but I threw it as far as I could, so that the griffin would look away for a moment, and as soon as it did I made

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a little run and a big sprawling dive for the hilt of the king's sword, which was sticking out under him where he'd fallen. I knew I could lift it because of having buckled it on him when we set out together.

But I couldn't get it free. He was too heavy, like Malka. But I wouldn't give up or let go. I kept pulling and pulling on that sword, and I didn't feel Molly pulling at *me* again, and I didn't notice the griffin starting to scrabble toward me over King Lir's body. I did hear Schmendrick, sounding a long way off, and I thought he was singing one of the nonsense songs he'd made up for me, only why would he be doing something like that just now? Then I did finally look up, to push my sweaty hair off my face, just before the griffin grabbed me up in one of its claws, yanking me away from Molly to throw me down on top of King Lir. His armor was so cold against my cheek, it was as though the armor had died with him.

The griffin looked into my eyes. That was the worst of all, worse than the pain where the claw had me, worse than not seeing my parents and stupid Wilfrid anymore, worse than knowing that I hadn't been able to save either the king or Malka. Griffins can't talk (dragons do, but only to heroes, King Lir told me), but those golden eyes were saying into my eyes, "Yes, I will die soon, but you are all dead now, all of you, and I will pick your bones before the ravens have mine. And your folk will remember what I was, and what I did to them, when there is no one left in your vile, pitiful anthill who remembers your name. So I have won." And I knew it was true.

Then there wasn't anything but that beak and that burning gullet opening over me.

Then there was.

I thought it was a cloud. I was so dazed and terrified that I really thought it was a white cloud, only traveling so low and so fast that it smashed the griffin off King Lir and away from me, and sent me tumbling into Molly's arms at the same time. She held me tightly, practically smothering me, and it wasn't until I wriggled my head free that I saw what had come to us. I can see it still, in my mind. I see it right now.

They don't look *anything* like horses. I don't know where people got that notion. Four legs and a tail, yes, but the hooves are split, like a deer's hooves, or a goat's, and the head is smaller and more — *pointy* — than a horse's head. And the whole body is different from a horse, it's like saying

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a snowflake looks like a cow. The horn looks too long and heavy for the body, you can't imagine how a neck that delicate can hold up a horn that size. But it can.

Schmendrick was on his knees, with his eyes closed and his lips moving, as though he was still singing. Molly kept whispering, "Amalthea...Amalthea...." not to me, not to anybody. The unicorn was facing the griffin across the king's body. Its front feet were skittering and dancing a little, but its back legs were setting themselves to charge, the way rams do. Only rams put their heads down, while the unicorn held its head high, so that the horn caught the sunlight and glowed like a seashell. It gave a cry that made me want to dive back into Molly's skirt and cover my ears, it was so raw and so...*hurt*. Then its head did go down.

Dying or not, the griffin put up a furious fight. It came hopping to meet the unicorn, but then it was out of the way at the last minute, with its bloody beak snapping at the unicorn's legs as it flashed by. But each time that happened, the unicorn would turn instantly, much quicker than a horse could have turned, and come charging back before the griffin could get itself braced again. It wasn't a bit fair, but I didn't feel sorry for the griffin anymore.

The last time, the unicorn slashed sideways with its horn, using it like a club, and knocked the griffin clean off its feet. But it was up before the unicorn could turn, and it actually leaped into the air, dead lion half and all, just high enough to come down on the unicorn's back, raking with its eagle claws and trying to bite through the unicorn's neck, the way it did with King Lir. I screamed then, I couldn't help it, but the unicorn reared up until I thought it was going to go over backward, and it flung the griffin to the ground, whirled and drove its horn straight through the iron feathers to the eagle heart. It trampled the body for a good while after, but it didn't need to.

Schmendrick and Molly ran to King Lir. They didn't look at the griffin, or even pay very much attention to the unicorn. I wanted to go to Malka, but I followed them to where he lay. I'd seen what the griffin had done to him, closer than they had, and I didn't see how he could still be alive. But he was, just barely. He opened his eyes when we kneeled beside him, and he smiled so sweetly at us all, and he said, "Lisene? Lisene, I should have a bath, shouldn't I?"

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I didn't cry. Molly didn't cry. Schmendrick did. He said, "No, Majesty. No, you do not need bathing, truly."

King Lir looked puzzled. "But I smell bad, Lisene. I think I must have wet myself." He reached for my hand and held it so hard. "Little one," he said. "Little one, I know you. Do not be ashamed of me because I am old."

I squeezed his hand back, as hard as I could. "Hello, Your Majesty," I said. "Hello." I didn't know what else to say.

Then his face was suddenly young and happy and wonderful, and he was gazing far past me, reaching toward something with his eyes. I felt a breath on my shoulder, and I turned my head and saw the unicorn. It was bleeding from a lot of deep scratches and bites, especially around its neck, but all you could see in its dark eyes was King Lir. I moved aside so it could get to him, but when I turned back, the king was gone. I'm nine, almost ten. I know when people are gone.

The unicorn stood over King Lir's body for a long time. I went off after a while to sit beside Malka, and Molly came and sat with me. But Schmendrick stayed kneeling by King Lir, and he was talking to the unicorn. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I could tell from his face that he was asking for something, a favor. My mother says she can always tell before I open my mouth. The unicorn wasn't answering, of course — they can't talk either, I'm almost sure — but Schmendrick kept at it until the unicorn turned its head and looked at him. Then he stopped, and he stood up and walked away by himself. The unicorn stayed where she was.

Molly was saying how brave Malka had been, and telling me that she'd never known another dog who attacked a griffin. She asked if Malka had ever had pups, and I said, yes, but none of them was Malka. It was very strange. She was trying hard to make me feel better, and I was trying to comfort her because she couldn't. But all the while I felt so cold, almost as far away from everything as Malka had gone. I closed her eyes, the way you do with people, and I sat there and I stroked her side, over and over.

I didn't notice the unicorn. Molly must have, but she didn't say anything. I went on petting Malka, and I didn't look up until the horn came slanting over my shoulder. Close to, you could see blood drying in the shining spirals, but I wasn't afraid. I wasn't anything. Then the horn touched Malka, very lightly, right where I was stroking her, and Malka opened her eyes.

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It took her a while to understand that she was alive. It took me longer. She ran her tongue out first, panting and panting, looking so *thirsty*. We could hear a stream trickling somewhere close, and Molly went and found it, and brought water back in her cupped hands. Malka lapped it all up, and then she tried to stand and fell down, like a puppy. But she kept trying, and at last she was properly on her feet, and she tried to lick my face, but she missed it the first few times. I only started crying when she finally managed it.

When she saw the unicorn, she did a funny thing. She stared at it for a moment, and then she bowed or curtseyed, in a dog way, stretching out her front legs and putting her head down on the ground between them. The unicorn nosed at her, very gently, so as not to knock her over again. It looked at me for the first time...or maybe I really looked at *it* for the first time, past the horn and the hooves and the magical whiteness, all the way into those endless eyes. And what they did, somehow, the unicorn's eyes, was to free me from the griffin's eyes. Because the awfulness of what I'd seen there didn't go away when the griffin died, not even when Malka came alive again. But the unicorn had all the world in her eyes, all the world I'm never going to see, but it doesn't matter, because now I *have* seen it, and it's beautiful, and I was in there too. And when I think of Jehane, and Louli, and my Felicitas who could only talk with her eyes, just like the unicorn, I'll think of them, and not the griffin. That's how it was when the unicorn and I looked at each other.

I didn't see if the unicorn said good-bye to Molly and Schmendrick, and I didn't see when it went away. I didn't want to. I did hear Schmendrick saying, "A dog. I nearly kill myself singing her to Lir, calling her as no other has *ever* called a unicorn — and she brings back, not him, but the dog. And here I'd always thought she had no sense of humor."

But Molly said, "She loved him too. That's why she let him go. Keep your voice down." I was going to tell her it didn't matter, that I knew Schmendrick was saying that because he was so sad, but she came over and petted Malka with me, and I didn't have to. She said, "We will escort you and Malka home now, as befits two great ladies. Then we will take the king home too."

"And I'll never see you again," I said. "No more than I'll see him."

Molly asked me, "How old are you, Sooz?"

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"Nine," I said. "Almost ten. You know that."

"You can whistle?" I nodded. Molly looked around quickly, as though she were going to steal something. She bent close to me, and she whispered, "I will give you a present, Sooz, but you are not to open it until the day when you turn seventeen. On that day you must walk out away from your village, walk out all alone into some quiet place that is special to you, and you must whistle like this." And she whistled a little ripple of music for me to whistle back to her, repeating and repeating it until she was satisfied that I had it exactly. "Don't whistle it anymore," she told me. "Don't whistle it aloud again, not once, until your seventeenth birthday, but keep whistling it inside you. Do you understand the difference, Sooz?"

"I'm not a baby," I said. "I understand. What will happen when I do whistle it?"

Molly smiled at me. She said, "Someone will come to you. Maybe the greatest magician in the world, maybe only an old lady with a soft spot for valiant, impudent children." She cupped my cheek in her hand. "And just maybe even a unicorn. Because beautiful things will always want to see you again, Sooz, and be listening for you. Take an old lady's word for it. Someone will come."

They put King Lir on his own horse, and I rode with Schmendrick, and they came all the way home with me, right to the door, to tell my mother and father that the griffin was dead, and that I had helped, and you should have seen Wilfrid's face when they said *that!* Then they both hugged me, and Molly said in my ear, "Remember — not till you're seventeen!" and they rode away, taking the king back to his castle to be buried among his own folk. And I had a cup of cold milk and went out with Malka and my father to pen the flock for the night.

So that's what happened to me. I practice the music Molly taught me in my head, all the time, I even dream it some nights, but I don't ever whistle it aloud. I talk to Malka about our adventure, because I have to talk to *someone*. And I promise her that when the time comes she'll be there with me, in the special place I've already picked out. She'll be an old dog lady then, of course, but it doesn't matter. Someone will come to us both.

I hope it's them, those two. A unicorn is very nice, but they're my

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friends. I want to feel Molly holding me again, and hear the stories she didn't have time to tell me, and I want to hear Schmendrick singing that silly song:

Soozli, Soozli,
speaking loozli,
you disturb my oozli-goozli.
Soozli, Soozli
would you choozli
to become my squoozli-squoozli...?

I can wait.

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CURIOSITIES

THE FLYING COWS OF BILOXI, BY BENSON BIDWELL (1907)

CHICAGO at the turn of the last century is famous for one literary humbug, the man who posed as Oz the Great and Terrible in L. Frank Baum's famous book. Living there at the same time was another humbug, one [Joseph] Benson Bidwell (1835-1912), self-promoter, supposed inventor, and author of two books: a short epistolary fantasy, *The Flying Cows of Biloxi*, and an autobiography, *Benson Bidwell, Inventor of the Trolley Car, Electric Fan and Cold Motor*. The latter is one of the most unintentionally funny books I have ever seen, describing events of Bidwell's life on the level of myth and with numerous oddball illustrations captioned "Baby Brother Petting Snake," "He Scalds His Mother's Foot," "Live Indian Roasted on Logheap," "Old Horse Resents Singeing," etc. The prose is similarly heightened. Ah, what Monty Python could do with this tale!

The Flying Cows of Biloxi (similarly illustrated) collects Bidwell's letters to a friend about how, when visiting Biloxi, Mississippi, in 1893, he observed that the cows fed upon Spanish moss, which grows only high up in the trees. So Bidwell invented a way to graft branches of orange trees onto the cows so they could fly up for their feed. The wings have the added advantage of growing oranges! Another great invention for the learned Bidwell!

The truth is another story. A perusal of the *Chicago Record-Herald* from 1907-09 finds Bidwell arrested and charged with embezzlement. Investors in his cold motor engine claimed that their money was used solely to fund the publication of his two books. Benson was convicted of running a confidence game and sentenced to ten years in prison. His son (and partner) accepted the prison term so his elderly father could remain free. *The Flying Cows of Biloxi* lives as a curiosity for many reasons.

—Douglas A. Anderson

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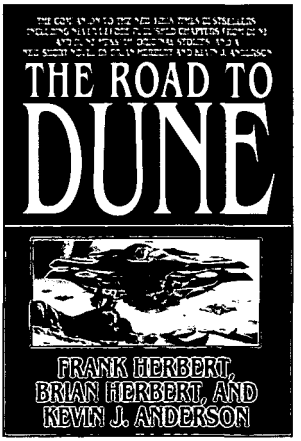

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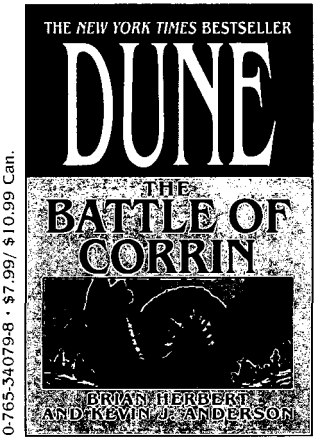

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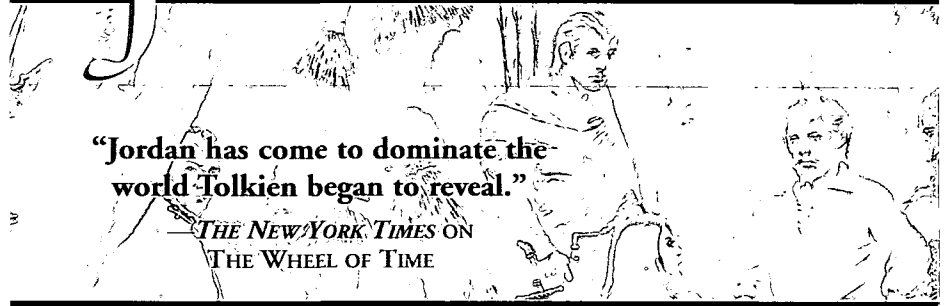

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